

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

POLICE CORRUPTION,
NEURODIVERGENCE, AND
THE TERRORISM WATCH LIST

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Disclaimer:

This autobiography is a personal account of the author's life experiences, memories, and perspectives on the same. For the avoidance of doubt, it is based entirely on real events, and was composed whilst the author was on police bail, having been arrested for multiple offences under firearms and terrorism legislation. No charges have yet been proposed.

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and honesty throughout the text, it is important to note that memory can be subjective. Naturally, certain events may be remembered differently by others who were involved. As such, this book represents the author's own recollection and interpretation of the events mentioned, which do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of others.

Some names, descriptions, characteristics, and locations have been altered, both to provide the author with a degree of legal protection from the restrictions found within the Contempt of Court Act 1981, and to protect the privacy and anonymity of the individuals and organisations involved—however much they might not deserve it.

Finally, unlike many characters you will encounter within these pages, I have a great respect for the law and the criminal justice system; if there *is* contempt to be found, it certainly isn't on my part.

“I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself.”

Thomas Paine
The Age of Reason

Prologue

DEPRESSION IS A strange old beast. I described it to my GP as being like an ever-present shadow. No matter how bright the light in which you bathe yourself, the shadow never leaves you. It offers the same reassuring, welcoming presence that a recovering alcoholic might experience whilst battling addiction at the same time as being left alone with a frosty bottle of cider.

It is temptation, but more than that—for me anyway—it is friendship. It is a sinister companion, a faceless entity cloaked in impenetrable shades of colours we can't quite describe. It beckons us into the darkness, promising to shield us from the ills of the world. It taps into our deepest desire to seek something maternal, something comforting amidst the unnatural way in which we now live. It has a heart that beats, knowing that we immerse ourselves every single day in superficiality—the meaningless drone of television and social media, relentlessly bombarding us with manipulative advertisements, news of the latest social trends, and images of the current beauty standards, all neatly sandwiched between the never-ending lies of elected politicians and world leaders. Moreover, it smiles knowingly at our continued rejection of nature's breathtaking gifts, as we decimate them in favour of soulless buildings constructed from concrete, glass, and steel. As human beings, we crave opportunities to learn, yet so often our desire is either stifled outright, or directed down a limited number of socially approved pathways. Thus, we find ourselves trained to avoid the nonconformist, yet it is depression which steers us off the beaten track, herding us towards isolation from the flock.

I know the hopes that depression offers are a false friend, the work of a trickster who will always betray—such is the nature of the beast. Perhaps the process of anthropomorphizing an illness is symptomatic of something much deeper, maybe even down to the roots of the disorder. It has a peculiar aura that ebbs and flows like the tide of the sea. Depression grows stronger when you are alone, it invades your mind when you are most vulnerable, silently slipping in through

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doors you thought you had locked. This is what I meant by it being a shadow—anyone who has ever truly suffered with depression will know that no barrier exists, physical or mental, which can stop such an insidious companion. Depression is a monster which knows no bounds: day or night, joy or sorrow, fear or favour. It sidles up to you, places a warm, reassuring arm around your shoulder and whispers in your ear: *come with me, everything will be alright*. However, it is not like the shadows in Peter Pan, it cannot be disconnected, rolled up, or locked in a drawer, although for many people it seems just as tangible. It deceives those it affects, and those around them too. It can spread like wildfire; it is a disease for which there is no cure.

I have also experienced the sibling of depression: anxiety. Unlike depression, anxiety is fear, and whilst the root causes are many, I have always understood anxiety to be unwanted adrenaline which your body produces with great enthusiasm the very moment you are confronted by any kind of absence—this could be the silent void before a decision, or perhaps the darkness of the looming unknown. For some people, anxiety arises through the most minimal of interactions—an unexpected knock at the door, or a downward glance from a great height. It can strike anywhere at any time... unlike Ridley Scott's aliens, it doesn't mostly come at night. When it does decide to spontaneously pay you a visit, your mind becomes a rally driver, accelerating and hurtling onward whether you like it or not. Anxiety cares not for the twists and turns in the road ahead, it is panic, agitation, dread, and hysteria all rolled into one. For some, anxiety can be kept at arm's length, whether through medication, meditation, or some other means; they are the lucky ones.

Nobody really knows about my own battle with anxiety, which was caused by my experiences of corruption and abuse within the police service; experiences no doubt worsened due to my autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with which I was formally diagnosed at 40 years of age. I have contemplated whether my anxiety is actually PTSD in disguise, but I feel strongly that those unfortunate souls who experience the horrors of war, or worse, the agonies of torture, cannot be compared to those who have experienced having their life more mundanely but systematically ruined. I cannot describe the differences in any great detail, but perhaps timing is a large part of it—it is an explosion versus a deadly, slow burn. The correlating factor is

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helplessness, the reversion to a child-like state where absolutely *nothing* is within your control. You are forced to endure whatever cruelties are thrown at you; you are spoon-fed poison and left to deal with the consequences. Anxiety will loom out of nowhere to hijack and control you, leaving you terrified, sometimes mentally scarred. Anxiety always leaves the door ajar so it can return.

I have always had a strong will, but even that is not strong enough to keep these harbingers of misery at bay. Controlling them is a difficult process, taming them is impossible. But since I was formally diagnosed with autism, my fight has taken a peculiar turn. I'm still not entirely sure whether my autistic behaviours are *natural*, *per se*. They are certainly beneficial—if channelled correctly—but those who do not understand either depression, anxiety, or autism have no idea about the true toxicities of the mix. It is a chemical cocktail which, when the moon is full and the tide is high, needs support, lest the sufferer give in to the wolf. It needs intervention and friendship. With the exception of the endless support I received from my wife Anna, I had almost none of these things outside of my home. I was passed from pillar to post by the NHS, my employers refused to recognise my autism and denied me support, and I was exploited, lied to, and received broken promises from the police, those claiming to be the most experienced of all: officers seconded to my area's Regional Organised Crime Unit, ROCU for short. Understand that this is not an exercise in blame; in no way do I use these facts to admit doing what I stand accused of, but this *should* be an exercise from which lessons can be learned. Sadly, I suspect the classroom will be empty.

So, this book is dedicated to everyone who has fought battles with mental illness, irrespective of whether they won, lost, or continue to fight. It is also dedicated to those who were left behind, perhaps wishing they could have done something more. Over two thousand years ago, the poet Ovid wrote: “Neither can the wave that has passed by be recalled, nor the hour which has passed return again.” True words indeed.

A small proportion of the population already understands that our society does not truly support mental health. We need more than bus-stop advertisements for 0800 numbers which connect you to low-budget call centres staffed by students and retirees. We need more than the emergency services distributing wallet-sized contact cards

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which showcase the boggling plethora of generic, Monday-to-Friday charities. We need more than the strategic placement of support leaflets, slowly wilting in the artificial heat of GPs' waiting rooms. We need more than the creation of a snappy government website or two, offering generic platitudes about 'understanding' before directing you back to the same 0800 numbers linked to the inexpensive call centres... And so, the cycle begins again.

Successfully supporting someone suffering with their mental health requires the offer of truly meaningful intervention; not to judge but to promote hope, to bring a light bright enough for the shadows to recede, even if they do so only temporarily. Sadly, it is always easy for people to deny, shut out, or isolate things they do not want to understand. Nowadays, as a society we smile and lie to each other as easily as we lie to ourselves in the mirror. In fact, lying has become such an integral part of our everyday lives that dishonesty has now been broken down into types and categorised by the social sciences: white lies, compulsive lies, careless lies, defensive lies... The list goes on. I have learned that lies can rarely be justified; they do not heal, they harm.

Over time, I have encountered many people who don't want to listen, who prefer to keep their view of the world obscured by a veil of ignorance—I understand that. They prefer the comfort of the blue pill, opting to write people like me off as paranoid, prone to romanticising, or simply inconvenient, but I know my story is the truth because I have *lived* it. Writing this book was a huge step for me, and in doing so, I offer you the red pill. Whichever you choose, I hope this marks the end of a long period for me which has, in various cycles, been frustrating, distressing, worrying, and unfair. Every passing year has delivered some unexpected new indignity, and each step forward only resulted in me taking two steps back. In every metaphorical game of chess I have been forced to play, I have lost far more pieces of my own than I ever gained from my opponent. Now, I only seek the lasting peace and happiness that I have never really known.

If any of what I have written, either here or in the pages that follow, reaches you on some level, or perhaps if you know, or knew, someone like me, this book is for you. It is also for my wife, to give her something to remember me by when I am no longer close.

Let me show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.



PART 1

Foundations of Truth

“I detest symbolic protest, as it is an outcry of weak, middle-of-the-road, liberal eunuchs. If an individual feels strongly enough about something to do something about it, then he shouldn’t prostitute himself by doing something symbolic. He should get out and do something real.”

William Powell
The Anarchist Cookbook

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SPEAKING FOR MYSELF, picking up any form of autobiography can be an exciting experience. You settle down somewhere comfortable, open the book, but then find yourself being forced to plough through the first few chapters which inevitably cover (often in unnecessary depth) the author's family life and childhood. This has always been the draining part for me. I'm the kind of person who likes to cut to the chase, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to get to the heart of the matter. No matter the idiom, the point remains the same—we all had a childhood, we all went to school, many of us didn't get along with our fathers... I'm sure you get the picture. Familiarity breeds contempt, as the saying goes. Whilst I have intentionally steered away from giving a detailed backstory of my own early history, given that the purpose of this book is to explain my own first-hand experiences of the toxic concoction created by the combination of corruption and neurodivergence, there is a necessary degree of narrative which must be provided in advance.

I am sure most professional psychologists will agree that our kaleidoscope of life experiences, particularly those in our formative years, shape and define who we are. But what if, for *some* people, exposure to those same foundational experiences (and the resultant process of unconsciously assigning values to them) were first funnelled through a variety of subconscious limitations? It matters not whether those hypothetical individuals proceeded to subject themselves to the experiences, or were successful in avoiding them altogether; from the perspective of cognitive development, both outcomes are equally impactful. What effect, if any, did the existence of those overarching limitations have upon their paths of natural progression? This, I believe, is a very basic explanation of the question of neurodivergence.

Consider a child's first day at secondary school—commonly referred to, with natural trepidation, as 'big' school. Following months of anticipation in which their confidence was bolstered by their parents whilst being simultaneously exposed to tales of wonder from their schoolmates, many children arrive at secondary school and,

having been appropriately prepped, view this new experience with a degree of awe and wonder. They will absorb everything like sponges, savouring each new thought and feeling. Positive mental values are rapidly assigned to the experience, and among the busy chatter of the corridors and playing fields, new connections are made, friendships are forged. Perhaps some will realise the innate significance of this step: natural progression towards adulthood. A new process of learning begins, fresh rules are implemented, and those children will no doubt return home at the end of their first day bursting with pride, full of stories about their encounters and experiences. They will fall asleep exhausted whilst their brain carefully processes and filters the results of their actions, computing them against the resultant experiences. What was successful can be built upon; what was not can be discarded. The shaping has begun.

Now consider a child who, nestled inconspicuously among the same pre-teen groups buzzing with gossip and excitement, remains silent and motionless. If anyone stopped to observe, they might detect a flicker of fear in their eyes. That child may have gone through identical preliminary experiences, the parents trying their best to generate enthusiasm, perhaps providing increased reassurances when they realised something was potentially amiss. But the child's own subconscious limitations, buried deep within the neurological network, presented obstacles that could *not* be overcome. Now exposed to this dreaded new situation of secondary school, this child, frozen in fear, does not know what to do. They may be emotionally shutting down, or conversely, becoming mentally overloaded, finding themselves being internally bombarded with a hundred and one different options, their brain frantically calculating and processing to the point they cannot effectively function. They did not *want* this experience, yet they have been forced into it. As a result, negative mental values are being subconsciously applied. As the day progresses, the child slips silently from place to place, cloaking themselves in the hustle and bustle around them. Their focus remaining inward, they are now learning tactics to support their new-found invisibility: they are fast becoming the *grey man*.

Where the first child learns to embrace and participate, the second child learns to avoid. Not out of choice, but out of some primal survival instinct: for them, avoidance is a necessity. In due course, the

child might become the subject of frustration or anger exhibited by their teachers. They might be chastised for their lack of willingness, their avoidance of participation in classes or the overall ‘social’ experience of the school. And so, the child begins masking. Like a chameleon, they become adept at camouflage, giving the bare minimum as and when it is required, doing *just enough* to scrape by under the radar, but importantly, enough only to endure the experience; to survive another day. Growing acutely aware of their increasingly ghost-like existence, they do not voice their concerns or worries, nor are enquiries typically made after their welfare. These children are drowned out by the loud, the noisy, the attention-seeking. It is the extrovert’s natural power over the introvert—the loudest person in the room often has the least to say.

And so, the child turns inwards, becoming stuck in existential conflict. They may be viewed as an enigma or contradiction, in that they may exhibit short attention spans when confronted with long, dull lessons, but might also find never-ending appeal in silence, as they wander inside their own heads. Much of their learning occurs on a dual plane of existence—on one level, they learn to adapt to the situations around them, mimicking the behaviours of their peers so as not to draw unwanted attention. They may participate, but do not feel *part* of things. On another level, their learning is an immensely private experience. They may become quietly fascinated with single topics or areas, wishing to absorb everything about that particular interest, almost to become one with it.

The second child was, give or take some of the experiences, me. Sadly, I was never receptive to the ‘standard’ methods of teaching recommended by the state, with matters not helped by the fact I had no awareness of my autism; a diagnosis which would come many years later. In my defence, at the start of my schooling experience I showed interest in *some* subjects—I found the conflicting worlds of science and religion particularly fascinating, and occasionally my interest was piqued to the point where I felt a growing desire to learn more. However, I consistently found that I was unable to keep up with the flow of information being imparted. This is not to say that I was ‘slow’, more that the curriculum was so impossibly full that there was no time to support stragglers. If you tripped and fell at the first academic hurdle, you were left behind. For the sake of their own careers,

teachers could not risk the obvious backlash which would result from the majority of their students receiving lower-than-average grades come the end of the term. Thus, it was an unspoken acknowledgement that it was not academically acceptable for any teacher (and by extension, the remainder of their class) to slow their pace to assist the one or two who struggled. As a result, I often suffered a sensation of drowning during lessons, and the knowledge that I risked stifling the learning experience of my classmates became a heavy burden to bear. So, I often sat in the classroom in lugubrious silence, the voices echoing into distortion and words blurring beyond comprehension. I became lost in alternating states of introspection and minute details—feeling the grooves and scars in the wooden desk, the colour and texture of the notebook covers, the peeling laminated plastic of the textbooks.

It is a sad fact that my struggles drew an attitude of hostility from my teachers; I remember being publicly chastised and called ‘stupid’ on more than one occasion. In many cases, despite the saying, words leave a much longer-lasting impact than sticks and stones. This old-school discipline caused me to burn with embarrassment, and it might not surprise you to learn that it *didn’t* have the desired effect. In fact, the outcome was quite the opposite: I began to resent being forced to attend lessons at all. Eventually, I switched off completely, sometimes doodling letters, patterns, and cartoons to keep me occupied, passing the time until I could return to learning subjects of *my* choice at *my* pace. The notion of school was sold as a ‘one-size-fits-all’ glove, which could more accurately be described as ‘one-size-fits-some’.

So, I became increasingly withdrawn and instead found comfort and solace in the school library, where I could learn what I wanted at a pace I was comfortable with. One might then expect my interests to be the antithesis of the curriculum, but this was not quite so. From the age of thirteen I would often sit, for the full duration of each lunch period, absorbed in the pages of *National Geographic* and *New Scientist* magazine. I read Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. Sometimes I tried reading the *Financial Times*, but the boggling combination of money and politics failed to hold my attention. I began pleading with the librarians to order in specialist magazines for me, spending my pocket money on protective covers to keep my magazines in pristine condition. Periodically the staff would try to shoo me outside, telling me that the fresh air was good for me. I simply snuck

back inside when the first opportunity arose, sitting somewhere concealed from view and ducking down when the librarians passed by.

I was aware that I had no true depth of understanding of many of the topics I read about, but I found comfort in the acquisition of knowledge; it was something I could carefully save in preparation for the day I was finally ready to understand it. In tandem, I also developed a satisfaction in collecting. I remembered my earlier years of primary school, where I couldn't find *anywhere* a back-issue of the first edition of a comic I collected. I had tried enquiring with libraries, bookshops and even the publisher—I was nothing if not tenacious. Eventually, I resorted to writing a letter to an activity centre where I had once seen it, pleading with the owners, in my most eloquent penmanship, to send me their sole copy. The comic was completely meaningless to them and they happily obliged, but it meant the world to me. My desire to collect applied to other things too. Stickers, milk caps, action figures—if it was part of a set, I *needed* the set; I would not play with the items until the collection was complete. Whilst I imagine this was fairly normal, by twelve I was routinely writing disgruntled letters to companies like Nestlé and Cadbury, expressing dissatisfaction with the unequal proportions or distribution of their chocolates (I'm looking at you, Smarties) or the inaccuracies of their product photographs. False advertising continued to bother me well into adulthood. So, often left to my own devices, my own process of shaping—and thus *being* shaped—was well under way.

Meanwhile, perhaps spurred on by the many questions science had yet to answer, I also began to enjoy the weird and the wonderful, immersing myself in the world of unexplained curiosities as documented in the *Fortean Times*. By fourteen I was researching spontaneous human combustion, nuclear experimentation, ley lines, trepanation, life after death, and the likelihood of extraterrestrial existence. At fifteen I considered joining the Society for Psychical Research and attended public talks relating to the unexplained and the bizarre. Despite it being fiction, *The X-Files* became a source of inspiration for me. I felt a kinship with Fox Mulder—his desire to explore forbidden knowledge was something I saw in myself, although I was never quite sure why the lure of the restricted was so strong. I longed to visit the rural village of Borley in Essex, once home to the UK's most haunted house, Borley Rectory. Not content with learning

about such bizarre and frightening encounters from books alone, I needed to see and experience things first-hand. One day, I was able to successfully navigate the BBC's switchboards, eventually being connected with an Irish news presenter who had indeed once visited the Rectory. She seemed bemused by my questions, but the conversation satisfied my urges. I learned best when I was able to interact directly with the source material.

My fondness for kinaesthetic learning led to a natural consequence—I began to explore the world of computers. Many years before Apple became a world-wide name for their i-everything branding, they produced clunky desktop computers which were sold to schools and colleges. We had a bank of the *Macintosh Classics*, a beige-coloured integrated screen and computer which only provided a 512 x 384-pixel greyscale display. Despite being purchased chiefly for their word-processing abilities (the internet didn't yet exist as a 'commercial' product), I used the machines to explore the inner workings of the system, learning how to manipulate digital icons and settings. When the internet finally arrived, I began to delve into the world of programming, quickly seeing opportunities to not only increase my knowledge but to exploit things. I began to enjoy the very basics of 'hacking', learning about passwords and reading back-issues of the (at the time) text-only *2600* magazine.

All of this kept me entertained and, from the perspective of my parents, studiously occupied. But sadly, it did not stop me from failing academically. One of my favourite classes was Religious Education—learning about different cultures and their most sincere beliefs in the many variations of the creators and destroyers of worlds inspired something deeply mystical within my soul. Meanwhile, despite my parents paying for private maths and French tuition, my overall GCSE results were still abysmal. I remember sitting in the exam hall, feeling utterly helpless as I stared at my technology GCSE paper. I found myself reverting to my helpless fascination with small details—I listened to the tick of the clock, I watched the routes of the invigilators as they silently navigated between the rows of desks, I considered the precision of the measured arrangements. For someone so strongly analytical, I couldn't see correlations between things which were obvious to others, yet I could see unconventional patterns and links most people were blind to. Ultimately, to me anyway, the teachings of

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school were all but useless. I could not understand the somewhat abstract view (increasingly applicable the higher up the educational ladder you rose) that your achievements held greater value than the knowledge you acquired on the route to obtaining them. I believe the origins of the quote have been lost to time, but it is often said that “Your degree is just a piece of paper—your education is seen in your behaviour, attitude, and character.”

And so, I left the school system nothing more than an enlightened failure. On a subconscious level, somewhere deep down, I had decided that I was not content with following the established paths—I had no interest in choosing from the limited number of conventional routes which were traditionally available. Although I had absolutely no idea where I was going, deep down I had the spirit of a lone pioneer. I wanted to explore, to forge my own path, something which—in the best understanding of George Orwell’s *1984*—was neither understood, nor welcomed by those who had the power to care.

“The most dangerous man to any government is the man who is able to think things out without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane and intolerable.”

H. L. Mencken
A Mencken Chrestomathy

2

AND SO IT came to pass that I enrolled in a local college. In increasing desperation at my growing disconnect, my parents had suggested that my writing skills could be applied to the world of journalism. A keen viewer of *The Cook Report*, I had enormous respect and admiration for Roger Cook, somebody I have always wished to meet. The investigative journalism behind the BBC's *Panorama* was fascinating, and like the rest of the country, I was deeply shocked by the doorstep assassination of *Crimewatch* presenter Jill Dando in 1999. So, with moderate enthusiasm I began a course in Media Studies, but quickly became bored, frustrated with the bloated egos of the all-male course tutors. I watched them flirting with the starry-eyed teenage girls, giving them heightened attention and preferential treatment. The unfairness and disparity of it all began to frustrate me. They were being paid to deliver an education, yet seemed more interested in the vanity of self-promotion whilst mentally undressing their students. In contrast to my earlier experiences in secondary school, this time my being sidelined was nothing to do with academic ability.

Meanwhile, the internet was exploding as an unchecked free-for-all, a source of any and all information people had decided to share. The information superhighway wound its way through endless websites and forums which were, at the time, akin to the wild west. I am proud to say I was one of the very first users of Google Mail back when it was exclusive, and users could only sign up by invitation only. In my thirst for knowledge, I remember stumbling across a collection of articles which would, many years later, become outlawed across the post-9/11 world. It was *The Jolly Roger's Cookbook*, a compilation of over a hundred American-authored text files dealing with an eclectic range of generally forbidden topics, including hacking phone systems, improvised hallucinogenic drugs, obtaining free food, poisoning, making backyard explosives, and constructing false identities.

No longer feeling a valued part of my Media Studies course, I considered my drab college a suitable target upon which to practice

some of my growing computer skills. I set up some software on my home computer, which was specifically designed to instigate a DDoS (Distributed-Denial-of-Service) attack. At the time it was *technically* a crime under the Misuse of Computers Act 1990, but computers were still specialist knowledge, meaning the vast majority of police officers had absolutely no idea where to begin in understanding the technological workings of the process, or the outcomes they produced. I set the software to bombard the college servers with a single text-based email, which was repeatedly sent as fast as my poor computer processors would allow. Annoyed at the way my enthusiasm had been forcibly put on the back burner, I left it running for days on end. With the data flooding in, the college's limited computer network couldn't cope. It quickly became unusable and eventually crashed, as the stream of data relentlessly continued. Imagine being delivered so many letters that you can no longer use your front door, or eventually, your garden. ("That's it! We're going away! Far away! Where they can't find us!")

It is not a time I often have cause to think about, and looking back now, I acknowledge that my actions were inappropriate; however, whether they were justifiable as a form of protest against the overt actions of a cluster of predatory male college tutors remains a different argument, one centred around morals and ethics. In my post-ASD-diagnosis world, I read of studies which noted that individuals at the 'higher-functioning' end of the autism spectrum can sometimes have difficulties in modulating their anger. Whilst I have never been one for physical violence, I believe strongly in the fair administration of justice, and when it is not forthcoming, I have—admittedly very rarely—taken matters into my own hands.*

So, with college out of the window and little else to do in merry old middle England, I re-immersed myself in the world of self-study. My earlier download of *The Jolly Roger's Cookbook*, in conjunction with the tangible successes of my computer abuse, had provoked a quite legitimate interest. I learned about manipulation of phone systems through dual-tone multi-frequency signalling, dutifully going to have a

* I am writing this whilst on police bail for trumped-up criminal offences which, in all likelihood, could put me away for well over a decade. Given that the entire debacle is based upon a combination of lies, wrongful arrests, and unlawful imprisonment, I suppose this book is a fine example of me taking matters into my own hands, in that I am giving myself a voice where I would otherwise stand no chance of being heard.

poke about and experiment with my local phone box. I read much about Kevin Mitnick, an American hacker who had been arrested by the FBI in 1995, and was subsequently charged with, and imprisoned for, a slew of computer-related crimes. There were obviously many loopholes to exploit, but for what gain? I began to experiment with different operating systems, installing Linux on my home computer. I wondered how far technology could be pushed—could I install Windows on an Apple Mac? I learned about the BIOS, the purpose of the Windows registry, and the ways in which computers stored data.

I didn't know it at the time, but *The Jolly Roger's Cookbook* was heavily inspired by *The Anarchist Cookbook*, a book authored by William 'Bill' Powell in the 1970s post-Vietnam USA. Of course, it didn't take me long to find that out. I soon discovered the remarkable world of dissident American publishers such as *Loompanics Unlimited*, *Paladin Press* and *Desert Publications*; they believed firmly in their constitutional right to freedom of speech preserved in the First Amendment. Although these publishers had arisen from the still-warm ashes of the '60s counter-culture, contrary to what people might believe nowadays, there was no actual, demonstrable rage against the machine. In fact, *Loompanics* founder Michael Hoy was keen to ensure that his publishing company did not fall into the trap of showing support for any of the usual political movements.

As publishing houses, their books were as controversial as they were unconventional, and all the information they distributed had one common denominator: it was knowledge which—in many countries, anyway—was socially or legally frowned upon. Whilst at the time none of the books they sold were illegal (at least until 1999, when the US Supreme Court banned Paladin Press' 1983 book *Hit Man: A Technical Manual for Independent Contractors*, authored by Rex Feral), their catalogues opened up another outlet for my vast network of growing interests.*

One of my first controversial purchases from *Loompanics* was the book *Uberhacker!* by Carolyn Meinel, published in April 2000. The exploitation and manipulation of computers led me to consider what could be achieved when combining computer software and the real

* I should probably add that my growing interests did *not* include becoming a hit man, as interesting as it might be for a career.

world, and I followed it up with the purchase of another book, *How to Make Driver's Licenses and Other ID On Your Home Computer*. I gave a lot of ethical consideration to the very few lines I ever chose to cross, and although I was utterly fascinated by the processes employed in the book, I never actually made any fake driving licences. However, the book did introduce me to the earliest versions of *Adobe Photoshop*, subsequently provoking my interest in graphic design, which in turn secured me my first job... thus proving that a rose *can* sometimes grow from concrete.

As the internet grew from its infant stages, a world-wide freedom network opened up, where like-minded individuals could gather, share information and ideas, and inspire one another. This in itself was not illegal, but the world of piracy quickly moved online too—no longer were VHS tapes copied in real-time; the content was digitally converted into billions of binary 1s and 0s before being shared in a much wider context. It cannot be denied that many people began to abuse the privileges of the internet. I don't believe that, in my acquiring information for the purposes of learning, I could readily be labelled as one of those who did so. Except for the single DDoS attack against my former college, any and all 'hacking' (and I use the term very loosely) and computer experimentation I have ever subsequently performed was on my own systems, for my own purposes, and would lead—many years later—to my undertaking a degree in Cyber Security. However, other people put their skills into practice more openly and recklessly. They learned and adapted, taking their new-found information with them into the public domain, where they used it to cause harm or generate illicit income. Profiting from the manufacture of drugs became a more realistic prospect once you could download copies of books such as *The Cannabis Grow Bible*, which local librarians would never dream of stocking. Illegal trading began to take place, for example on the dark web's *Silk Road*, where users bought and sold everything from drugs to fake passports to real firearms, in the belief their locations were hidden, and paying by Bitcoin suggested their transactional data was encrypted.

As controversial information became increasingly available due to the interconnectivity of the world-wide web, it became necessary for commentators to consider whether it was unduly oppressive for a government to make attempts at censoring information which could

inspire, but could also be used to break the law, albeit hypothetically. One case in point is lockpicking. I own several lockpicking kits, as well as some specialist transparent locks on which I have practiced. Becoming a locksmith is a legitimate, and very lucrative, career. Does practising this art make me dangerous? Hacking is another example. People make significant careers out of providing digital protection to companies and organisations, deploying various penetration testing techniques to identify exploits in their commercial networks, which are then patched and fixed. It's fair to call this digital locksmithing. Hacking and cyberwarfare are increasingly becoming tools of the military, so is this knowledge dangerous? What about survival techniques? These could be readily turned into something positive, such as selling unique 'package' experiences as gifts, or teaching skills to a local Scout group. However, many of the very same skills could also be used by a fugitive on the run from the law. Once someone has acquired some, or all, of this information, should they be considered dangerous? Does it become justifiable for a government to monitor them? What happens to the soldier, or the demolitions expert, the nuclear physicist, or the forensic pathologist should they decide to leave their chosen career? Is it morally right for the government to censor *knowledge*? These questions may be hypothetical, but they have their roots firmly grounded in real-world issues. Michael Hoy, owner of *Loompanics Unlimited*, posed a similar question during a 2005 interview: "Cops who have a detailed knowledge of criminal techniques might not always be cops. How can you erase information from their brains when they revert to being civilians?"

It was in response to the rapidly increasing flow of such information that governments across the globe recognised the need to monitor, to become proactive as opposed to just reactive, to be ready to step in and counter anything occurring online which already was, or might become in due course, illegal. A barely detectable and constantly shifting line separates the two, and one must not forget that the same government which performs the monitoring duties for 'public safety' is the very same government that will pass new laws enabling it to encroach further into private territory. Centuries ahead of his time, William Blake once declared: "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." Not willing to risk being outdone, the government began to create more laws, more oversight, more

bureaucracy, and more systems—something that is still occurring to this day. The notable introduction of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, snidely referred to by oppositionists as the *Snoopers' Charter*, is a perfect example.

So where does legitimate monitoring end and unlawful intrusion begin? As the decades have passed and the battles over censorship and ownership have continued to rage, things have taken a significant turn, and an enormous amount of power has now been inadvertently handed to private corporations. These corporations profit from our online activities as well as making them available for government inspection. We all own mobile phones which track our every step, every search, every purchase, and every message—both sent and received. The terms and conditions of use for both the devices and the applications they contain permit the international parent companies to use that data in almost any way they see fit. Photographs we have taken on our phones undergo automatic facial recognition analysis, which compare and store the same faces against the respective entries in our contact lists. We have digital video doorbells, which identify visitors and log their faces, movements, and conversations in the cloud. Millions of us own an *Alexa*-powered, or similar, audio device, which is constantly listening, applying voice recognition techniques to real-time speech. Even when the devices are *not* being commanded or interacted with, the recordings they make are transmitted, via the internet, to the parent company for storage and analysis. Some argue that mobile phones do the same thing, but without the user's knowledge. Regardless of the recording's source, police in the USA have made solid cases against people from obtaining such private audio snippets. This is no longer the stuff of science fiction; it is science fact. Nor is it a conspiracy—as a society, we have given up an *extraordinary* amount of privacy in exchange for our convenience. We have become lazy and are only just beginning to pay the price for falling asleep at the wheel—just ask Edward Snowden.

Aside from my (apparently bad) habit of reading, it is precisely this sort of in-depth analysis of life which I have often found myself conducting. I can readily spot links in seemingly random data, meaning I have always been good with keeping my finger on the social pulse... maybe I should have been an analyst. So, considering the bigger, emerging picture is something quite instinctive to me, but curiously,

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my need to do so can searingly conflict with my innate desire to learn. When this clash occurs, something must *always* give way, and it is perhaps my ASD which can be held liable when I find myself prioritising my acquisition of knowledge over the potential consequences of doing so. It is the neurodivergent equivalent of Samuel Beckett's apparently much-bastardised quote: "Dance first, think later—it's the natural order."

3

WITHOUT A DOUBT, the biggest mistake in my life was becoming a police officer. From the outset, it was a profession which did not want me. At the time, I had not received my ASD diagnosis, so I was oblivious to the increasingly overt signs that I was seen as different, and therefore not welcome. Nor did I consider that my intense interests, in conjunction with my naturally occurring behaviours, were warning signs that I might not be entirely suited to the profession. Well, I tell a lie—I very much enjoyed working within well-defined parameters, and the police service offered a clear structure, both in terms of organisation and expectations, which was unlike the fluidity inherent in many other alternative career paths. So, I would probably have been *very much* at home, were I to become a specialist in a particular field. However, my development opportunities would be consistently denied—but more about that later.

In many respects, the police service at the start of the 21st century was deeply hypocritical. Whilst on one hand the service claimed to be rigorously impartial in their selection of only the best and most capable individuals to be sworn into the Office of Constable, on the other hand, some forces would freely give away answers to application questions at targeted recruitment events, privately considering the attendees to be of statistical value, but incapable of even completing the most basic paperwork without being rendered a significant degree of assistance. The police service was also insincere in promoting development opportunities to officers once they had joined, conveniently failing to declare their dark secrets—that most openings were exclusively reserved, either for those with familial or Masonic connections, or those officers whose characteristics the force wished to exploit for data- or publicity-driven purposes.

Elsewhere, despite the existence of independent government watchdogs, whenever it was considered to be advantageous to achieving an end goal, the police service would nonchalantly break laws it was finding inconvenient or bothersome. In my time, I would see both members of the public and officers themselves bullied,

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harassed, and even assaulted, never mind the wider cultural and behind-the-scenes issues which had (and continue to have) much broader societal implications.

As a service, it was also prone to lying and manipulation. In response to whatever the government considered to be a current hot topic, the police service would rapidly change direction, steamrollering over anyone who hadn't received the memo. I would frequently become embroiled in disputes about crime recording, and at one point would find myself ordered to cease my investigation of child rapes and sexual assaults committed by a prolific paedophile, simply because the sheer number of crimes he committed made statistics for the local area *look bad*.

It is only with the benefit of hindsight that I can acknowledge my neurodivergence was of significant benefit to me in surviving for as long as I did. I was rigid in my views and was not easily dissuaded; I knew what the police service *should* have been, and I refused to accept it for what it was. Understandably, this made me remarkably unpopular with senior officers, and until my very last day in the uniform, I continued to fight for common sense, and for what was morally and ethically right. I battled onward, my determination relentless, never stopping to realise two things. First, at some point in my career, I had become a marked man. Second, no matter the pressure exerted (or indeed, by whom), the square peg will *never* fit in the round hole.

This may all sound overly dramatic; I assure you it is nothing but the truth. Regrettably, becoming a targeted individual of interest meant the police service felt justified in destroying my life, and has done so not once, but twice; their preoccupation is verging on obsession which, in criminal terms, becomes harassment. In response, I feel the truth of my experiences should now be told, as many of my former colleagues continue to pocket their generous, taxpayer-provided wages, and will no doubt refuse to bite the hand that feeds them, lest the golden pension pot be surreptitiously slipped out of their reach.

4

I CAN DISTINCTLY remember the moment I first contemplated joining the police service. I was little more than a quiet, reserved beanpole of a teenager with a shock of curly brown hair. I had started my career as a graphic artist, moving on from a city-centre poster and print shop to become a graphic designer at a local newspaper. My job involved arranging and laying out advertisements for local business owners, who were smooth-talked into buying column space by the newspaper's navy-skirted and -suited sales representatives.

In my spare time, I continued to immerse myself in the world of forbidden knowledge. Inspired by my earlier download of *The Jolly Roger's Cookbook*, I purchased a physical copy of William Powell's *The Anarchist Cookbook*. Despite the so-called "recipes" for explosives randomly scattered throughout, there was some wonderful social commentary about the anti-government sentiment at the time, which had a real 'stick it to the man' vibe, something I had never encountered before. The British tended to be much more meek and compliant when it came to politics and civil disobedience. Of course, those were the days before 9/11, before the threat of Islamic extremism dominated terrorism, before the hasty introduction of the Terrorism Act 2000. I had absolutely no interest in making bombs, explosives, LSD, or crystal methamphetamine—I simply bought the book because I could, because there was a lure, a fascination with the unusual, the controversial. In a similar vein, I then purchased *The Poor Man's James Bond* by Kurt Saxon, which I found far less interesting.

As my natural, behavioural patterns dictated, my interests moved on, and I became fascinated with mysteries from US history. I learned about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the secretive studies conducted by the United States Air Force codenamed *Blue Book*, Harry Truman's *Majestic 12*, and the CIA's *Stargate Project*. I was not a conspiracy theorist by any stretch of the imagination—I simply enjoyed reading and learning. If it was unusual, quirky, or strange, my interest was instantly aroused. I read about the Cheyenne Mountain

Complex, studied satellite photography of Area 51, and pored over details (and photographs, where I could find them) of visitors' encounters with unmarked helicopters and military police, snapped brandishing rifles and binoculars among the rocks of the great Arizona desert. However, these remained interests only—I might have been a dreamer, but I was certainly not deluded into believing that little green men had meetings with the President in the basement of the White House, or the idea that Her Majesty the Queen was a shape-shifting lizard.

One day, I discovered that one of the newspaper's sales representatives was a Special Constable in her spare time, often volunteering at her local police station on Friday and Saturday evenings. I remember mulling this over, curious about what the police actually *did*. During a further discussion one day, I peppered her with questions. In response, she recommended that I join up, suggesting I would enjoy the experience. Aside from my family being the victims of a single burglary at my childhood home many years ago, I knew next to nothing about the police service, and I most certainly had no idea of the derision and eye-rolls that were frequently aimed at Special Constables around that period. They were commonly identified by a pair of much-hated shoulder pins—the letters 'SC' set below Her (now His) Majesty's crown. Disparaging nicknames such as the 'Hobby Bobby' and the 'Weekend Warrior' were often cast about behind closed doors, as Specials were often relegated to policing low-risk local events, not taking any of the strain from full-time officers. My application would serve to be an unpleasant introduction into the elitist, toxic culture of the police service.

My application was a success, and—in the scientifically documented ways of the autistic—my focus immediately switched once again. I moved away from learning about secretive government projects, dropping the topic like a hot stone in exchange for learning about the criminal legislation of the United Kingdom. That's how it came to pass that I spent six weekends undertaking basic police training at a manor house, formerly a military recuperation hospital, which had since been repurposed and designated as a police training and ceremonial venue. The only vehicle I owned at the time was a 50cc moped, and I recall finishing my five-day working week at the newspaper on a Friday evening, before battling through wind and rain

early the following morning (at a top speed of 30mph) to undergo a full day's worth of training. At around 17:00, I would say goodbye to my new colleagues and begin the equally slow journey back home. I repeated this process on twelve occasions, and I was so full of enthusiasm that I paid little attention to the fact I had essentially spent 42 days working non-stop... In hindsight, have never been good at recognising warning signs.

The grand conclusion of our training was a small-scale ceremony attended by the Chief Constable, who was accompanied by his very pleasant wife. After a series of handshakes and photographs, hot drinks and a small selection of sandwiches were served in the adjacent room; I remember being amazed that the police had their own specially crafted ceramic plates, cups, saucers and even silverware, all featuring the force crest. As I gingerly slipped between the guests in my black woollen tunic, my dress shoes sharply clacking on the polished dark wood of the floor, I realised that money seemed to be no object to the police. How little I truly knew.

As had my colleague at the newspaper, I had been assigned to conduct my voluntary duties at my local police station, and I was given my own key and photographic ID by the (rather miserable) staff in the uniform store at the police headquarters, who reminded me of trolls stuck in a cave. I was also assigned a tutor Constable, who I would find was a heavyset brute of a man who spent much of his duty time either bragging about his rough upbringing in an inner-city council estate, or cleaning and polishing his classic vehicle in the confines of the police station garage, *always* on taxpayer time and money.

Although I don't classify myself as particularly spiritual, I certainly believe in the ability to pick up energy (or 'vibes') from people, and the aura exuded by this man was nothing short of hostile. I would later come to discover that the local teenagers hated him because he would randomly punch or push them around whenever he felt like doing so. He was the epitome of the word 'bully', and I would soon come to find out precisely how violent he could be.

5

ONE OF MY first duties as a Special Constable was to attend a funfair run by the local council. The location was some grassland directly between the looming shadow of a medieval castle and a traveller site—a strange juxtaposition. I walked to the event with two fellow Specials, one of whom had the appearance of a keen rugby player, with the other more akin to an underweight, bespectacled accountant. We must have been a strange trio to behold, and I felt myself squashing a feeling of pride as people stared at us. As I felt was befitting of the role, I kept my hands behind my back and tried to solemnly nod in greeting to the odd person in passing; most just avoided my gaze.

We arrived at the fair, which had a small stage (in preparation for sets played by local bands), a couple of refreshment vans and, from memory, some children's rides. A rusty, long-wheel-base police Ford Transit van was parked at the edge of the grass, with "CCTV UNIT" plastered in navy blue across the side. A 360-degree camera sat on the top of an extending pole, giving the effect of a heavy-duty lollipop. My colleagues rolled back the side door before ordering me inside. I clambered up and sat on a dark grey swivel-chair facing a bank of monitors, where I was told not to touch or do *anything*, the latter word vocally stressed exactly as it is presented in type. The door was then shut, enclosing me in the darkness, the only light sources being the several screens showing the event slowly unfolding outside. As the families began to arrive, I realised how quiet it was in the van, and I felt a million miles away from real life.

In my naivety, I wondered if I'd been given some special assignment (no pun intended). However, I did exactly as I was told and sat there completely motionless, waiting for further instructions. After what seemed like an age, there was a knock on the side door. I rolled it open, finding one of the stage crew outside. He asked me to accompany him to the security fencing to deal with a drunk who was giving the crew some hassle. I felt panic begin to set in. Although I had been provided a police radio, I had absolutely no idea how to contact

my colleagues. They hadn't told me their call-signs—had this been deliberate? I began to worry about making myself look stupid. Was there a radio controller acting as an intermediary for communication? Or was this a back-to-back channel purely for the event? I tried to think back to my training, snapping out of my racing thoughts to find the crew member waiting impatiently for me to climb down from the van.

The man was unrelenting, pointing repeatedly to the stage. I could see a scruffy bloke holding a can of beer, wobbling around precariously at the front perimeter fencing. A couple of gruff-looking chaps with folded arms were refusing to let him past, and I found myself wondering—what the hell do they need *me* for?

I glanced around, unable to spot my colleagues anywhere. Little did I know, they were busy drinking tea, propping up one of the refreshment vans around the corner. I picked up my radio and tentatively called for their help. No response. The man was radiating nervous energy—I assumed the first band were due to start soon, because it looked like he was becoming increasingly desperate. With a sinking feeling in my chest, I picked up my helmet (sometimes referred to as a 'lid') and stepped out of the van. I shut the door behind me, slipped my head into the uncomfortable, cavernous, black bucket, and began strolling over towards the drunk.

As I faded into his vision, he began rambling, lecturing me about something in an aggressive, alcohol-fuelled slur—it was many years ago now and the details of his nonsensical prattle escape me—but I remember patiently listening and then politely asking him to go away. He refused. I told him if he didn't go away, he'd be arrested. He refused again. We quickly reached a stalemate, and I could feel the watchful eyes of at least a dozen people burning into my back.

Thankfully, this was the point my two colleagues appeared. Rather than assist with the slightly sketchy situation at hand, they instead gave me an almighty rollocking in front of everyone for not listening to their instructions. They were both twice my age, and I felt like a child being scolded for trying something new, the results not up to the satisfaction of the chastising parent.

"You were told not to leave the van."

"But—"

"You were told. Not. To. Leave. The. Van."

I suspected that the increased volume and accompanying heavy glare meant I should shut up, and I decided to do so. One of my colleagues began to deal with the drunk, giving him some helpful shoves towards the nearest road, while the other pretty much dragged me back to the van by my arm. He was obviously exasperated, and I tried to explain but he wasn't having any of it.

"You didn't listen."

I decided for the last time to protest my innocence, explaining that I had used the police radio, but nobody responded. That about did it. Whether he genuinely didn't hear me or whether he did and opted not to respond, it didn't matter. My colleague erupted, and pretty much told me to clear off back to the station.

The final memory I have of the event is me walking back to the police station alone, deflated and upset, wondering what I was supposed to have done—it was the answer they never gave me.

In the years that followed, I would discover that the needs of the public always played second fiddle to the whims of the police themselves.

“We cannot expect people to have respect for law and order until we teach respect to those we have entrusted to enforce those laws.”

Hunter S. Thompson

6

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, I was informed that I would be going out on duty with my designated tutor, a man who I privately nicknamed *the Oaf*. He was a ‘regular’ officer, meaning policing was his full-time job, and I would be turning up to work a normal shift alongside him. Keen to impress, I made sure my white shirt was ironed, my trousers had a suitable crease, and my boots were polished. I wanted to portray myself as keen and professional, but little did I know that this would be an impossible task.

I walked into the briefing room shortly before 07:00 to a cluster of officers sitting around a table. It was a very ‘masculine’ group, and there was a vaguely unpleasant, macho aura about them. The Sergeant, an overweight man with a ruddy complexion, a large tuft of brown hair and a round stomach badly concealed under his ribbed navy duty jumper, stared at me.

The officers were all white males, and I recalled that I hadn’t seen a single non-white officer so far. I considered that this perhaps wasn’t unusual, given the demographics of the area in which I lived, but it still felt strange. Although I too was both male and white, I was acutely aware that I was still different, by virtue of the simple fact I was an outsider. I am prepared to admit that the depth of my contemplations may be increased with hindsight, but the lack of variety in sex and ethnicity in the briefing room was something that still struck a deep, unidentifiable chord at the time.

I was told to sit down and did so. Despite my height, everyone else was easily twice my build, and many of the officers were much older than me. The Sergeant commenced the briefing, which I would later come to realise was a ridiculous concept. The centrepiece of the briefing room was a computer, upon the screen of which was displayed an amateur-looking webpage. This was, quite literally, a basic HTML file containing text and occasional images. The ‘system’ which contained the webpage had a logo—a cartoon wizard wearing a pointy hat, holding a magic wand. The actual briefing process itself consisted

of the Sergeant reading out each article verbatim, as though every officer present was illiterate and unable to absorb the information on their own terms.

When the briefing was complete, everyone was given their duties. I was to be sent out with the Oaf on a mobile patrol. I had never been in a police car before and was very much looking forward to getting out and about. I hadn't experienced much of a welcome, and I quietly began to hope I would have more in common with the people who dialled 999 rather than those who turned up as a result.

The Oaf led me to the police garage, where he decided now would be a good time to wash his personal vehicle—a classic soft-top. I found it unbelievable that either he had moved a police vehicle outside into the elements in advance or was routinely left a parking space by other officers, who presumably had no wish to incite a quarrel. The Oaf went to fetch a bucket and sponge, lecturing me about his car's history and performance as though he were trying to sell it. I didn't know much about cars and couldn't muster the enthusiasm to care; my lack of interest immediately rubbed him up the wrong way. If this was a test, I was failing it—badly.

Some time later, we were finally on patrol in a police vehicle, driving slowly around the locality. It was a suburban town, made up of a mixture of sprawling residential areas alongside a smaller collection of shops and supermarkets. Eventually a radio call came in—someone had been seen acting suspiciously in the grounds of a nearby church. Suspecting lead thieves at work, a witness had telephoned 999, and the Oaf informed the radio operator that we would attend.

Slapping on the blue lights and siren, the Oaf began increasing the patrol car to a speed I still maintain was outright dangerous. We began to leave the residential area, hurtling along a single carriageway country road. There was no verge whatsoever, only a thick wall of hedge rising up on either side of us, and the Oaf barrelled the car along, swerving around blind corners without a care in the world. I was trying not to let him see me gripping the seat, as I found myself being thrown from left to right every time he spun the steering wheel. I glanced over at the speedometer—we must have been doing 70mph. I knew from local knowledge that both horse riders and cyclists frequently used the road, and as there was no verge, had we swung around the corner into one or the other who just happened to be

travelling in the same direction, I am confident there would have been a fatality. Without belabouring the point, there was absolutely nowhere for anyone using the road to go when getting out of our way, but the Oaf appeared to have no concept whatsoever of the risks he was taking, slinging the car around as though he were a Hollywood stuntman.

We arrived at the church, and my legs wobbled as I got out of the car. I could smell the overheated brake pads, and feeling like I'd just stepped off a rollercoaster, my stomach lurched precariously as I walked towards the wrought iron gate. I wasn't entirely sure, but it looked as though the Oaf was smirking, and I wondered if he was enjoying the effect that his driving had. We searched the grounds of the church with no success, and once the radio operator had been updated, we resumed our patrol in silence.

A short time later, we were contacted by the Sergeant, who was back at the station. Someone was in custody for possession of cannabis, having been arrested the night before, and they were now 'fit' to be interviewed. The Oaf had been asked to do the honours.

We drove back to the station, entering a back door into the custody area. It immediately reminded me of a dungeon—it was grim, dark, and the only thing it was missing was the *drip-drip-drip* of water droplets. It felt very much like being in a cave, and after navigating some narrow twists and turns, the Oaf approached the single custody desk, informing the custody Sergeant that we would be interviewing the detainee for the drugs offence. The Oaf went to fetch the suspect, seemingly taking pleasure in the process of escorting him to the interview room. Looking back, the Oaf most certainly had a superiority complex, and every move he made would demonstrate, if not deliberately flaunt, the power that he wielded over others.

We entered the interview room, the suspect shuffling along ahead, bleary-eyed. Suddenly, the Oaf barked an instruction at him.

"Sit down."

The suspect did as he was told, sitting promptly in a black plastic chair next to a cheap wooden desk. The Oaf unwrapped the cellophane from a set of blank interview tapes. It crinkled in his large hands as he slapped the tapes into the recorder placed at the far edge of the desk.

The machine beeped and started quietly whirring as the tapes began to roll. The Oaf reeled off some information, informing the

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suspect he was under arrest on suspicion of possession of cannabis, that he could have a solicitor present, that—

“I’d like a solicitor.”

The Oaf stopped dead in his tracks. He stared at the suspect, his eyes burning like hot coals in a dark fireplace, his chest rising and falling as he exuded an air of menace. Without easing his death stare, the Oaf reached over and turned off the tape recorder with a single, meaty finger. He spoke slowly and calmly, but his body language suggested he was anything but.

“Are you going to fuck me about?”

The suspect blinked, looking nervous. “No?”

“Then what the fuck do you want a solicitor for?”

The suspect swallowed. “I just—”

“I’ve told you already. One quick interview. Admit that it’s yours. You get a quick charge and you’re out of here. *Don’t piss me about.*”

I realised a discussion must have taken place in the cell, well away from me as a witness. The Oaf let his empty threat hang in the air for full effect before he spoke again.

“Shall we start again?”

The suspect nodded silently. The Oaf snapped open the doors of the tape recorder, removing the cassettes and throwing them into the nearby metal waste bin with a resounding clang. He picked up another set of tapes, and as he had planned, started all over again.

Author's note:

In the 1990s, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, ordered an official study and report into interview methods used by the British police service. This came about following a worrying number of cases being thrown out of court, with the accused parties claiming the police used oppressive tactics during their interviews.

The report was produced in 1999 and published in the journal *Legal and Criminal Psychology* following joint research, conducted by Detective Chief Inspector John Pearse, of the Metropolitan Police's Criminal Intelligence department, and Dr Gisli Gudjonsson, of the Institute of Psychiatry in London.* Only a few years earlier, in 1995, Dr Gudjonsson had a joint-authored paper published in the journal *Psychological Medicine*, entitled 'The relationship between suggestibility and anxiety among suspects detained at police stations'.

Following publication of the article, Jason Bennetto, writing for *The Independent*, summarised its content as follows:

"The study, done by a psychologist and a Scotland Yard detective, examined transcripts and audio tapes from police interviews from 1991 to 1996 involving 18 serious crimes, including murder. In all cases, taken from forces around Britain, the officers obtained a confession from a suspect who at first denied the crime. But the researchers found that detectives frequently used intimidation and psychological manipulation to overcome resistance and secure a confession."[†]

Pearse and Gudjonsson's article gravely concluded that "the police resorted to manipulative and coercive tactics." This eventually led to an overhaul of processes and the creation of the PEACE interview model, the acronym standing for the five-step process interviewers would be trained to adhere to: planning, engage, account, closure, evaluation.

* Pearse and Gudjonsson, 'Measuring influential police interviewing tactics: A factor analytic approach', *Legal and Criminal Psychology* 4(2): 221–38.

† Bennetto, 'Police interrogation caused collapse of criminal trials', *The Independent*, 12 September 1999.

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This was the very same model the Oaf was supposed to have been using, following the latest government-mandated training. But when the crimes being investigated weren't considered 'serious', when nobody was looking, and when the individual being questioned wasn't likely to make a complaint, who *really* cared about how suspects were treated behind closed doors?

Little did I know, I would come to see the same, oppressive tactics still being used by seasoned Detectives over twenty years later.

7

THAT AFTERNOON, THE Oaf decided he'd had enough of me and packed me off on foot patrol. He demanded that I find twenty vehicles with out-of-date road tax. This was back in the day when cars had the old-style, paper discs visible in the corner of the windscreen. At the time I remember thinking that finding twenty seemed like a heck of a stretch—I seem to recall it was a Sunday, and my inner mathematician performed some brief calculations on the best roads to patrol. Even so, I thought I'd be lucky to find five, never mind bloody twenty.

The Oaf checked that I had a CLE2/6 pad, which—like the briefing earlier that morning—revealed how archaic some of the police processes already were. It was an A6 printed booklet, with a white ‘original’ sheet on top of a yellow ‘carbon copy’. If a police officer spotted an untaxed vehicle, he wrote details of the vehicle down on the form, along with the time and location of the sighting. The yellow copy of the form was left with the vehicle, and the original white sheet was returned to the police station, where it was then endorsed by a Sergeant before being forwarded by post to the DVLA in Swansea. It seemed ridiculous that there wasn’t a faster and more cost-effective method for notifying them, but, as former US Senator Eugene McCarthy once quipped: “The only thing that saves us from the bureaucracy is its inefficiency.”

To help achieve my impossible task, the Oaf sent me out with one of the other officers on the shift. He seemed to be the youngest, and he treated me much more sympathetically than the Oaf had done. We donned our lids and went on our way—it was a cool but sunny day, and the fresh air and slower pace would be a nice change. However, there was almost nobody about: it reminded me of a seaside town in the height of winter. We walked for miles, eventually heading into a residential area where I hoped to find better pickings. Sadly, the idea did not bear fruit—we found just two cars without road tax, and one of those was parked on a private driveway and was thus legally untouchable.

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At some point during our patrol, the officer asked me what I thought of the Oaf. I wasn't sure how to answer this question, and as though sensing my unease, he began giving me reassurances about the Oaf's wealth of experience and his untold knowledge—what a credit he was to the police service and how wonderful it was to have the opportunity learn from someone such as him. Thinking back, I should have detected such artificial platitudes and sensed the warning lingering in the air. I wouldn't say he was scared of the Oaf, but he was definitely cautious, and was perhaps encouraging me to be the same. I nodded, giving some generic agreements.

"What did you think of his driving?"

The question stumped me. Surely, I wasn't supposed to be impressed by the Oaf's reckless standards and overt disregard for other road users? The officer was asking increasingly difficult questions, and I couldn't determine whether he was seeking the comfort of an ally or fulfilling some secretive duty. Once again, I settled for something nondescript in response.

"He drives fast."

The officer chuckled, continuing to regale me with details of the Oaf's professionalism and dedication to duty.

As we talked, we seemed to come to an unspoken agreement that we had reached the furthest point of our journey. We began to gradually head back towards the police station, with me satisfied that, although I had not found anywhere *near* the number of untaxed vehicles the Oaf had asked for, at least I had a witness who could verify my efforts.

The station seemed to be dead, and we traipsed up the narrow, dusty staircase to a room that I had not entered before—it seemed to be the central hub of the building and was buzzing with activity. Cigarette smoke hung thickly in the air, and officers leaned around a pool table, spectating as a CID officer took a shot. Other officers lounged around on brown leather sofas, watching the news on a wall-mounted TV. A small kitchenette was visible on the far side of the room, where someone was making a cup of coffee. A couple of people eyed me suspiciously, and I remember it dawning on me that this was precisely why we never saw any police officers on patrol in the community—they were all holed up in here, playing pool, and watching television with their feet up.

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In less than two tours of duty I had seen cars being washed at public expense, suspects being threatened out of exerting their lawful rights, and standards of driving that, in any other circumstances, would be prosecutable. Smoking, playing pool and watching TV seemed far preferable to patrolling or investigating crimes. I would later hear stories from my friends about the Oaf assaulting them with no fear of repercussion. I agree that these experiences were minor when considering the broader spectrum of 24/7 policing, but to me at the time, it seemed the police were free to do whatever they wished, whenever they wished.

Undergoing further training in later years, I would find some of these actions would be described as *noble cause corruption*, a term first coined in 1989 by American author and scholar Edwin Delattre. Loosely put, the phrase encapsulates the justification of illegal behaviour for the benefit of the greater good, introducing the concept that the person exhibiting the behaviour may inwardly excuse their unlawful actions as righteous, whilst still retaining an awareness that, in a wider context, their actions would be considered ‘wrong’. For example, *the officer forced the suspect to admit the assault, because he knew that without an admission, the suspect would be released, free to assault someone else*. It reduced instances of overt offending to mere idiosyncrasies, and it was no surprise to discover the phrase would only ever really find itself linked to government. Any quiet tolerance of noble cause corruption demonstrated that society was, in part, being protected by the police use of illegal tactics.

Either way, the police very much felt like a closed circle, where newcomers were eyed with great suspicion. If there was no common goal of preventing and detecting crime to bring everyone together, what was there? Did any neutral ground exist, or was it literally a case of every man for himself?

I was imminently to be denied the opportunity to find out.

“When authority is total, so too is the madness of the man
who declares it, and the potential for abuse of power.”

Rick Wilson

8

ONE OF THE officers told me that the Oaf wanted to see me. I found him waiting in the Sergeant's office, a long, thin room at the edge of the building. There was a single window at the end, which overlooked the narrow street below.

I knocked and entered. The Oaf was leaning against a radiator, the reddened skin on his hairy hands presenting a sharp contrast against the smooth, ivory-white surface of the heater. The Sergeant who had conducted the shift briefing sat in a chair at the far end of the room, his right leg raised, the ankle resting atop his left knee. There was a momentary silence, and I felt like I had just entered a war room somewhere deep inside the confines of a restricted military base. I could sense some kind of plotting had taken place; the air held the scent of a plan recently hatched.

The door clicked shut behind me.

“You wanted to see me?”

Within a split second the Oaf not only stood up but took a swift step into my personal space. For a large man, he was deceptively fast. His stubble and oddly bulging eyes were inches from my face.

“We've got some concerns about you.” His breath was hot and sour.

I swallowed. “Okay.”

“First, what the fuck did you say about my driving?”

My mind instantly flashed back to the officer I was on foot patrol with, his probing questions, his excessive reassurances about the Oaf's skill, knowledge, and professionalism. Had I been led into a trap deliberately set by that officer? Or had the Oaf exerted pressure on him in the first place, instructing him to extract my personal opinion, thereby giving him an ulterior motive for accompanying me on the patrol?

“I... I didn't say anything about your driving.”

One of the Oaf's hands whipped out and closed around my neck. He shoved me back against the wall with a *thump*. Terrified, I looked

over at the Sergeant. Surely this couldn't be happening? To my horror, he met my eyes briefly—a tiny smile flickered across his face before he turned his head, making an overt point of looking out of the adjacent window. There would be no witnesses to whatever occurred here today, that much I knew.

The Oaf growled and spat his next accusation. "You told the lads my driving was shit. You make me so angry, I could just fucking punch you in the face."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't say anything of the sort, but looking back, I suspect the entire situation had been engineered from the outset. I realised that I had never been wanted at the station—whether this was because of my age, or just because I was a Special Constable, is something I have never been able to decide. Perhaps it was both. I began to suspect that the Oaf's driving had been deliberately bad, in the hope of extracting some protest from me at the time. This would have given him grounds to return me to the Sergeant, declaring that I was *incompatible, problematic, difficult*—the choice of words would have been entirely his. However, I had voiced no opinions and raised no such concerns, meaning the Oaf had been forced to take a different approach, using a third party as leverage. When the desired result was once again not forthcoming, he had switched to the tried-and-trusted techniques of the bully—lies, threats, and violence.

I have often thought back to this situation and wondered why I didn't react in a different way. I was still young. I had very little life experience, and I was certainly not a fighter. Plus, I had always been taught that the police were the good guys. I had not grown up in a city and I had no experience of urban policing. I had grown up in a rural village where the local bobby conducted his patrols on a pedal cycle. I had watched *Heartbeat* more than *The Bill*. Perhaps I was naïve, but the smiling faces of the 'Police: Could You?' poster campaign had seemed so welcoming. I had been hoodwinked; the officers I had encountered were *nothing* like that.

"I think it's best if you go."

His words barely registered. The room was spinning, and I'm not sure if my heart was beating extremely fast or had stopped altogether. I think the Oaf had expected some resistance. He released his grip, appearing to deflate slightly. I remember standing there feeling

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childlike, trying desperately not to show how upset I felt. Dejected, disappointed... stupid.

The Oaf spoke again, his voice slightly softer. "I'm not saying you're *never* going to be a police officer, it's just that perhaps now isn't the right time for you. Why don't you fetch your stuff and go home?"

He'd got what he wanted. Turning, with my shoulders now slumped, I left the office. I couldn't even look him in the eye as I walked out. I stood for a moment in the corridor, aware that the usual buzz from the nearby break room had fallen into a suspicious silence. Did they know? Did any of them feel sorry for me? I don't remember what I did—I think I must have gone to the locker room first. The last thing I remember is walking out of the station's front door, down the steps, and back into the normal world, where I finally felt able to breathe.

As I slowly walked back to my car, I looked around. Nobody was watching; I was alone. The tension I had been desperately clutching onto like a life-support suddenly dissolved, and the tears finally began their gradual escape.

9

NOWADAYS, ‘AUTISM’ REFERS to an entire spectrum of behaviour, hence the complete term *autism spectrum disorder*. As far as my own (admittedly, limited) understanding goes, it is generally regarded as a developmental disability related to the brain—ergo, a neurological condition. Many years ago, only the most profound forms of autism tended to be detected and diagnosed; however, in the 1990s, psychologists and psychiatrists began to recognise ‘milder’ forms related to the same disability.

It is easy to accept that the most effective intervention occurs if autism is detected in the earliest stages of development, typically within childhood. If it is *not* successfully detected—during screenings or similar processes—those whom it afflicts tend to develop ‘masking’ abilities as they get older, finding ways to naturally conceal that which makes them distinguishable from their peers. This behaviour is perhaps no different from the clinical psychopath who successfully disguises their fundamental lack of an internal personality structure in order to navigate the complexities of life.

One distinct ‘type’ of autism was first recognised in 1992. It was originally referred to as *Asperger’s Syndrome* based on the pioneering work of Austrian physician Hans Asperger. However, the term was officially ‘retired’ from medical recognition in 2013. This was in part due to political influence—Asperger was reported to have either worked with, or been sympathetic towards, the German Nazi party. Retirement of the term was also, in part, due to the work of British psychiatrist Lorna Wing, who reportedly introduced the concept of autism being a spectrum rather than a collection of different, albeit remarkably similar, conditions. So, *Asperger’s Syndrome* was formally merged with autism as part of the growing diagnostic spread related to the disorder. At one end of the spectrum are individuals who have extreme difficulty in communication; at the other are the behaviours and abilities noted by Asperger, which are occasionally referred to as ‘high-functioning’ autism, characterised by intelligence but failure to

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function in ‘normal’, socially acceptable ways. The oft-quoted example is the character Raymond from *Rain Man*, a film I should point out that I have never watched.

I think one of the problems which many autistic, and perhaps other neurodivergent, people experience as a part of their everyday battles in life is the fact that they can be some of the most strong-willed individuals you will ever meet. Many are incredibly persistent and will not take ‘no’ for an answer, which can lead to conflict. Blinded by the blazing fires which fuel their progression towards whichever goal they have chosen, they may be considered as narrow-minded, blinkered, or selfish. But they will become experts at whatever they have chosen to put their minds to, only being hampered by the social or communicative difficulties they encounter along the way. They are unlikely to pick up on social cues or nuances in communication and will forge ahead regardless. For those who experience life this way, it is not a case of mere stubbornness; it is rugged determination, wrapped up in an iron will and hammered on the anvil of life experience.

The police had pushed me out, but I would push my way back in.

“Of course fear does not automatically lead to courage. Injury does not necessarily lead to insight. Hardship will not automatically make us better. Pain can break us or make us wiser. Suffering can destroy us or make us stronger. Fear can cripple us, or it can make us more courageous. It is resilience that makes the difference.”

Eric Greitens

10

I DID NOT RETURN to being a Special Constable. I think my only real motive for re-joining the police service in due course was the fact that I knew, deep down, that I had been wronged. I believed in my heart that I was more than capable of doing the job, I had just been unlucky enough to encounter the Oaf and his colleagues. I reminded myself that I lived in a big county, with police stations in almost every town. The more I thought about it, the stronger my desire to prove him wrong became. In hindsight, that stubborn, autistic part of me kicked in, and I wanted to *succeed*.

My career in graphic design continued, and I began to move up in the world, switching jobs to work for a newspaper in a nearby city. The immense building overlooked a small harbour, and as visually impressive as this was, I quickly found the inner-city office environment wasn't for me. For a start, I never felt comfortable in a shirt and tie. On a more serious note, my fellow designers were uninspired, middle-aged women who seemed to harbour resentment towards me—in part because of my age, but mostly because I lacked qualifications. I would later realise that they had spent many years learning their craft, amassing a significant amount of student debt in exchange for a piece of paper which declared them to be capable artists. So, they had begun climbing the ladder from the very bottom rung, keen to espouse their knowledge and abilities to design in the time-honoured principles of Josef Müller-Brockmann or Massimo Vignelli, designer of the iconic NYC subway map.

Meanwhile, I casually rocked up to the front row of the same show, with no A-levels and no university education. I wasn't a rebel by any stretch, but I was certainly a fledgling nonconformist. My skills in specialist design software were entirely self-taught, originally inspired (somewhat ironically) by my purchase of *How to Make Driver's Licenses and Other ID On Your Home Computer*. At the time I considered myself no more than an enthusiastic nerd, however I had a vague awareness of something much deeper—for reasons I didn't

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understand at the time, I wasn't anything like the people who surrounded me.

My passions and interests were cyclic in nature, and in the past few months I had developed deeper pockets of knowledge about graphic design and art, having immersed myself in the subject after my departure from the Special Constabulary. Temporarily abandoning my interests in more controversial topics, I began to appreciate unconventional works and design. Preferring digital chaos over physical mess (such as Tracey Emin's overrated garbage), I enjoyed experimental typography, particularly the works of David Carson. Delving into a niche area, I acquired several expensive books on fonts, and read keenly about Max Miedinger, the original designer of the world-famous *Helvetica* font. I even tried designing my own fonts and attended a local art café in my spare time, hunting down one of my old art teachers—an eccentric, pipe-smoking old boy who dressed like a Frenchman and drove a battered old green Citroën DS. He was an inspiration to me, as much for his staunch independence as his art. Sadly, he passed away in 2007. Significantly, it is only recently that I have started to wonder if there is any correlation between my impulsive learning behaviours and times when I experienced higher-than-average levels of stress.

Over time, my 'in' tray began to pile up with requests. In equilibrium, the workload of my colleagues became lighter, their trays looking increasingly sparse as the weeks passed. Every morning, I would have sales representatives queueing at my desk, in some cases attempting to bribe me to allow them to queue-jump, to complete their proofs ahead of those submitted by their colleagues. The success in my work drove sales of advertising space, and I was given special assignments as favours, in one case designing a logo for one of the city's taxi firms, which they still use to this day. I even designed layouts for P&O. My output became favoured over that of my more experienced colleagues, and it is a logical course for insecurity to breed jealousy, as jealousy will breed envy, and envy breeds destruction. The fuse had been lit, but it would not burn for long.

I was at work when I learned of the 9/11 attacks taking place. The office fell silent as people began to gather around the large, wall-mounted television. We watched in absolute horror as the second plane hit, some staff turning away from the live footage of the poor souls

who chose to jump to their demise rather than choose death by fire. There has been much debate about the source of the attacks in the decades that have since passed, and I would go on to watch many documentaries about the subject. Little did I know how much 9/11 and the changing legal and societal attitude to terrorism would come to affect my later life.

Much to my frustration and disappointment, I was dismissed from employment with the newspaper after being subjected to covert monitoring by my disgruntled, frumpy colleagues. Apparently studiously working away at carefully positioned monitors (from behind which they could see my screen), they began to keep a keen eye on my work. Sitting next to—or sometimes behind—me, occasionally wandering past my desk with their necks craned, they would silently send progress updates to one another via email, in which they reported and logged what I was doing. Sometimes, between designs, I read the news. Other times, always during my lunch breaks, I worked on unrelated designs. I was never receiving payment for anything I worked on in my own time, and it was mostly experimental ‘fiddling’ to see what new and interesting results I could achieve with the software we had been provided.

When I did leave the office during my lunch period, I enjoyed sitting by the river. I had adopted a wooden bench under a weeping willow, where I would share the crusts of my sandwiches with the graceful swans—at least, whenever they saw fit to appear. I would carry an A5 lined notepad in my pocket and write poems and songs as people cut between the nearby road and the adjacent *Burger King*, doodling cartoons and caricatures, my mind never ceasing in its creative endeavours. I had always had a wonderful ability, when given the opportunity, to be artistic and to become lost in my passions, time slipping gracefully away as I worked.

I returned from such a break one afternoon to find my desk drawers had been untidily searched. My computer and desk had also been trawled through—items had been deleted, and zip drives, previously nestled between my pens and papers, were missing. Bewildered, I looked around, suddenly becoming aware of the smirking faces of my two female colleagues, who sat in a smug silence. Before I could understand that I had been stitched up, I was asked to attend the office of the advertising manager, a short, stout Welshman who

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had the appearance of being ex-military, although I suspected this was a pretentious front he adopted to compensate for his height. He produced a series of printouts of my nonsense lunchtime designs, accusing me of some kind of fraud. I was permitted no opportunity to interject, and I found myself dismissed from my job and escorted from the building in silence.

That was the point where I lost almost every ounce of my interest and passion in graphic design. The wonderful colours that ran through my internal world had drained away within mere minutes, and I would later go home and throw all of my art books in the bin. The topic unfairly soiled, I would never look at typography again. But in the meantime, I sat glumly on a metal bench at the train station, running my fingers over the contrasting textures, feeling the difference between the sharp, chipped paintwork and the smooth, drilled holes. Trains rolled by, bored commuters staring glumly out the windows while I sat wondering what the hell I was supposed to do with myself next.

11

WHEN YOU ABANDON a career, you have two choices. You can either try something new entirely, or you can revert to studying. If you opt for the former, you will need some kind of link; a connection who can get you a foot in the door. If you don't, you'll need to be able to demonstrate that you have relevant experience. Such is the catch-22 of modern employment—it's a running joke that employers want you to have experience before they employ you, but will not give you the experience which would enable you to become employed.

I didn't want to return to graphic design, and instead decided to use the training I had received from my brief venture into the Special Constabulary. I duly moved into security work, where—away from the typical office environment—I found myself working with much more agreeable people. There was less pressure, along with a 'come what may' attitude. If something happened, it was dealt with. If not, life carried on. Other than that, it was customer service and working within policies—I excelled at both.

So, I moved back into the city centre, working for a large, central college. The majority of the staff and students there were wonderful, but a small number of the students caused absolute chaos. They openly smoked (and sold) cannabis, had 8 Mile-style rap battles in the car park, and would frequently set about assaulting each other when the insults went a step too far. But despite this, we shared some good laughs. We had common interests in music—I often knew more about some of their favourite artists than they did. I enjoyed the clever lyrical wordplay of rap music, and I was absolutely fascinated by the 1996 murder of Tupac Shakur, having read several books on the subject. I'd even got hold of some CCTV footage from the Las Vegas casino he visited shortly before his death, along with a copy of his death certificate. I enhanced the details and, having obtained the international prefix, dialled the phone number listed for his next-of-kin—I was curious to see who answered. Anything is possible when

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you take the plunge, as I frequently did when there was information to be gained from doing so.

I remember one day we had been requested, by the college management, to search every individual entering the building. It seemed the directors wanted to push a ‘no tolerance’ approach for trespassers, and so clear instructions had been provided in advance—no ID, no entry. Within minutes of taking up a position at the front door, I had removed a baseball bat which one student had casually slipped inside the length of his tracksuit. However, I quickly fell foul of following the instructions, which I had taken (as I did with most things) at face value. An older lady, who clearly thought quite highly of herself, refused to stop for us. Barging past with an air of self-importance, she sneered and held her head high as I asked her for her staff ID card.

I don’t know about other neurodivergent people, but when things like this happen to me, they set off a chain of events in very quick succession. In the first couple of seconds, I contemplate the *why*. Was it a test? A setup to determine if we were doing our job properly? If not, what was it? Did she not hear me? I considered that to be unlikely. Was she just ignorant? Next, I begin to consider the options I have, followed by the most likely result of each, weighing each one against the other to determine the most appropriate route to follow. Should I let her go? If I did, she might report back that I was not robustly ensuring the safety of the premises. Should I follow her? What if she just continued ignoring me, subsequently making me look stupid? In that scenario, I would need to re-assess. Should I move ahead of her and intercept her? This would give me the option to request her staff ID again, only this time I would stand directly in front of her so she could not brush me off. Then I make my decision. Interception it was.

I soon realised this was a mistake, and the woman began berating me at full volume.

“Who do you think you are? Don’t you *dare* touch me. Get out of my way.”

I had, in fact, not touched her at all, but the immediacy of the accusation, alongside the severity in which it was made, caused me to take a half-step backwards in surprise. Her harsh tone rang down the corridor as I stood there, open-mouthed, watching her storm off. Something inside me felt heavy; it was the familiar weight of confusion

and disappointment. I assumed it wouldn't be long before she was raising all kinds of hell in front of the college directors.

My anticipations were correct—the woman proceeded to make a complaint, suggesting that I had been rude and had physically stopped her from entering the building; her account was completely malicious twaddle. However, that didn't stop one of the directors from coming and giving me a stern talking-to, warning me that the 'no ID, no entry' rule didn't always apply to *everyone*. It took me a long time to understand what sounded like a cryptic puzzle... I supposed this was what people called 'discretion'.

I imagine the majority of people would have simply written the experience off and moved on, but I became stuck on it. Like the needle of a record, I kept revisiting the same groove, playing it over and over in my head, even many years later. I simply didn't understand what I had done wrong. The directors had asked me to do something, I did it, and was then chastised for doing so. It didn't make any sense to me, and with no other way to understand why I had failed, I filed the experience away as a frustrating blip. You win some, you lose some, but either way, it seems you're never privy to an explanation, and for people like me, the stress this causes is sometimes out of all proportion to the incident itself.

Other experiences at the college generated similar confusion. At Christmas, there was a party due to be held in the restaurant once the college had shut. All the staff were invited, and in a demonstration of my age and innocence, it was the first non-family Christmas party I had ever been invited to. I remember feeling excited, enthusiastically raising the spirits of my colleagues as I imagined whether there would be food and drink. The evening finally arrived, and once the college was closed and the front doors locked, I led our little troupe to the restaurant. The party was already underway, and people turned to look at us as we walked in. One of the directors smiled and quickly hurried over. His voice was low and quiet, his palms open in a pacifistic pose.

"Sorry guys, this isn't for you."

I countered him, being sure to remain very polite. "But we were told it was for *all* the staff?"

"Yes, it is... well... all the staff *except* for security." I couldn't quite believe my ears. He quickly voiced a rapidly constructed afterthought. "Someone needs to watch the entrances, you see."

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The entrances were locked. Defeated, we turned and left, my colleagues cursing and murmuring “I told you so”. Annoyed, I promptly walked around the corner to the local petrol station, where I bought a six-pack of Budweiser. I returned to the office and, cracking open the bottles, we toasted to our own good health, sitting down to drink in a stony silence.

12

UNFORTUNATELY, IT SEEMED I was destined to cross paths with the police on a number of occasions while I was employed at the college. My first encounter came early one morning, after I parked up on a nearby side street. We were not permitted to use the staff-only car park, as there were only a limited number of spaces, and these were prioritised for use by teaching staff. I locked my car, slung my rucksack over my shoulder, and began trudging down the road on the short walk to the college. Music played in my headphones as a police patrol vehicle sidled up alongside me. The two uniformed officers, both white and male, stared at me. I nodded in acknowledgement and continued walking. The driver accelerated a little, enabling him to pull the vehicle up onto the kerb directly in front of me, the brake lights glowing bright red in warning.

In my ignorance, I assumed they were looking for a house. As I went to walk past, the driver clambered out, blocking my path.

“Morning mate. What are you doing?”

I couldn’t quite believe it. What was I doing? It was 06:30 and I was going to bloody work. I struggled to comprehend both the situation and the reasons he might have been asking and told him the situation bluntly. “I’m going to work.”

The officer frowned. “Right. It’s just... You’re dressed like a police officer.”

I stopped and looked down at myself. I was wearing the exact uniform I had been given by the college—black shoes, black trousers, a white shirt, and a black tie. I had a yellow construction-style bomber jacket on, and I had headphones on, blasting music from a blue MiniDisc player stuck in my inner left pocket. I was even carrying a rucksack with my lunch in it. Nothing said ‘police’—I had no utility belt, no hat, and I began to feel a little like I was being targeted, although I had no idea why.

“I’m a security guard over at the college.”

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The officer frowned again, narrowing his eyes. “Right. And which college is that?”

There was absolutely no way he didn’t know which college I was talking about—we could both see it from where we were standing. Perhaps this was his routine, an early-morning power trip or two to kick the day off. Alternatively, maybe he just didn’t believe me, and wanted to see if I knew the name of the college. So, I told him. He frowned again.

“Right.” He wandered back up to my car, an old boxy, black, 1990-registered Peugeot. He stared down into the empty seats as though he expected to find something—there was nothing to find. It was empty. He turned, and eyeing me with great suspicion, promptly ended the conversation. “Cheers.” He climbed back into the police car, pulling the door closed with a *thunk* before the vehicle slowly drove away.

I contemplated the underlying fragility of the interaction as I continued my short journey. Did I look like a police officer? Not really. A burglar? I didn’t think so. Maybe it was just a chance encounter, although something inside my head suggested I was giving the police far too much credit.

Only a couple of months would pass before I would see the police again. One afternoon, one of our more troublesome students went to leave the building. Upon emerging from the central stairwell, he was set upon by a gang who had discreetly lain in wait, hovering in the reception area. As the fight erupted, one of my colleagues dialled 999 and asked for the police. Meanwhile, one of the group pulled out a knife and stabbed the victim once in his back. I went to split the fight up, and the young man spun around, gripping the knife and thrusting the small blade towards me, a look of absolute fury in his eyes.

“Fuck off or I’ll do you too.”

I raised my hands up and took a couple of steps backwards. Then, my brain kicked into gear. Before I knew what I was doing, I was befriending him. “Mate, they’re on the phone to the police right now.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” he spat.

“You will when you get arrested. You need to get out of here.” I flashed my eyes in urgency, nodding towards the front door. He took the bait, stashing the knife back in his pocket and following me as I hurried down to the front door. I could hear the wail of approaching

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sirens somewhere in the distance. “Quick, the alleyway over there. I’ll tell them you went out the back.”

A look of confusion etched across his face momentarily. We were two different people from two different worlds, and for a brief moment, I felt sorry for him. He nodded curtly and jogged over the road, disappearing down an alley. Little did he know, the alley was a dead end.

The first of the police cars pulled up, blue strobe lights flashing. I pointed over the road. “Down that alleyway, just a minute ago.”

Without a word, the officers ran off in hot pursuit, and, with my job done, I returned inside. Everyone seemed to be panicking; there was electricity in the air. It’s sad in a way—I used to deal with tension fairly well, but nowadays, even the most mundane of situations (a knock at the door, car doors slamming shut) can set me off in a panic, adrenaline coursing relentlessly through my veins.

I returned to the victim, who was pacing around in circles like an injured lion. It didn’t seem to be a serious wound, but he was still dripping blood all over the carpet, something the cleaners probably wouldn’t appreciate. More police cars and an ambulance arrived in the car park. I never received any acknowledgement of my involvement in the incident, and I later heard that the offender was arrested, charged, and sentenced.

There is an old saying—live by the sword, die by the sword. Fifteen years later, one of the same group of students would be found dead, slumped over a wheelie bin in the city: there were never any satisfactory answers to the many questions which surrounded his untimely death.

13

I CONTINUED WORKING at the college—three years had now passed since my experiences as a Special Constable, and at some point, still being swayed by the national ‘Police: Could You?’ campaign, I decided to submit my application to become a full-time police officer.

I wasn’t exactly sure what my motive was for applying—I just filled in the form and did it. Looking back, I think part of me was simply curious to see whether I could pass the first paper sift. I was also still stinging from the way I had been treated by the Oaf. Naïvely, I remained adamant that my Special Constabulary experience could simply be chalked up to bad luck and nothing more. As my life progressed, I would find that—no matter my skill, effort, or dedication—bad luck *always* seemed to come my way.

While I waited for my application to be processed, I had my final interaction with the police at the college, which was just as unfortunate, if not more so, as the interactions which preceded it. A panic alarm had been activated inside the art studio on the top floor, and I made my way upstairs in the lift. Upon my arrival, I found a student arguing fiercely with an art tutor. Both were female, and I stepped between them, pleading for them to stop shouting so we could establish the easiest way to resolve the situation.

I didn’t know it at the time, but the student had recently been expelled, the decision made after she apparently stabbed another student in the neck with a sharpened pencil. It transpired she had returned to the college against all advice and instructions, presumably to ‘have it out’ with her tutor.

Thankfully the tutor listened to me and stopped shouting, but regrettably, the student did not—she was completely oblivious to my presence. She continued delivering her torrent of abuse—her anger was passionate, but entirely displaced. I have watched numerous people in similar situations work themselves up into such a frenzy they will suddenly lash out, and I had absolutely no desire to get involved in any form of physical intervention or restraint. However, if I didn’t

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do something quickly, I worried they'd end up tearing each other's hair out.

My brain worked fast and, scanning the area, I spotted the student's handbag sitting on a desk nearby. I logically figured that wherever the handbag went, the student would follow. Decisively, I made a show of picking it up and, making my way back towards the lift, called over to her.

"Come on, it's time for you to go." This had the desired effect, breaking her focus. A few seconds later she followed me into the lift, having now fallen completely silent. She was scowling and refusing to meet my gaze.

I hit the button for the ground floor and the doors slid closed. We began our descent in silence, and once we arrived in the reception area, the student stepped out first. I still held her bag and began to walk behind her to the building entrance, but she stopped unexpectedly. In a single, deft move, she removed a packet of cigarettes and a lighter from her pocket.

Oh no.

We had recently been warned that there had been so many false fire alarms at the college lately that, should just one more occur, the county's fire and rescue service had threatened to remove us from their list of premises which received a proactive response. I watched the student put the cigarette to her mouth, holding it in her lips as she raised the lighter. The receptionist looked up in alarm, beginning to wave her hands.

"You can't smoke in here."

The student acted as though she were completely alone; it was as though nothing could penetrate the mental walls which she had erected. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as I watched her thumb the lighter, a shaky orange flame obediently springing into life.

My brain was desperately searching for solutions, but there were none. I had no choice but to carry on walking without her, hoping that she would follow. I waved the handbag at her. "I'm just going to put this outside for you." I hoped that the threat of the student's belongings being left unattended would override her desire to make one last stand. She lit the cigarette, inhaling deeply, and her eyes met mine. She defiantly blew a huge cloud of blue smoke outwards. It lingered in the

air, hovering over the reception desk like an apparition. The receptionist was completely silent, and I noticed she had taken a step backwards. All eyes were on us.

“Come on.” I turned and walked away, clutching the handbag. As we reached the main entrance foyer, I turned around to check the student was following me. She was, and part of me sighed in relief. I stopped near the main entrance, turning around to give her the handbag. She stood directly in front of me, short and deathly silent, her eyes blazing with determination.

She took another drag on the cigarette, the tip glowing brightly. The fire alarm hadn’t gone off yet, and it might not do if I could discourage her from continuing to blow smoke everywhere. I imagined how angry everyone would be if a full building evacuation occurred.

“You can’t smoke here. You can smoke outside.”

Her right arm was a blur as she swung her hand in an arc towards my face, trying to jam the glowing cigarette into my eye. Instinctively, I ducked my head down and closed my eyes, feeling the searing heat as the tip burned into the skin of my forehead, just above my eyebrow. She forcefully drove it home and I reached out blindly, hoping to push her away. I connected with something physical, some part of her, and gave her a short shove backwards. There was sudden silence, and I opened my eyes, my head stinging. She had stumbled backwards, toppling down the short flight of steps which led down to the pavement. She was uninjured, but as I watched her pick herself up, I realised her anger had dissipated—she was now just stunned.

I heard a commotion, looking up to see an older black couple climbing out of a car parked nearby. They came storming over as it suddenly dawned on me: she had brought her family with her. The trio made their way up the steps towards me, all of them screaming bloody murder in unison. As they reached me, I don’t know who said it first, but I remember hearing one of the group make a sudden accusation:

“RACIST.”

All of a sudden, people lost it. I found myself being pushed and jostled, and in a daze, I managed to shut myself in the nearby security office. I had never been called a racist in my life, and the accusation stung more than the cigarette burn had done. I started panicking—why on Earth did they think I was racist? What did race have to do with anything? She attacked *me*. She tried to extinguish a cigarette in

my eye. Why was I being called racist for pushing away someone who was assaulting me? Yes, we had different colour skin, but why was that relevant? I had family from the Caribbean, Egypt, and Australia. Where did the sudden accusation of racism come from?

Looking back now, I understand that, even over two decades ago, the word still generated extremes of emotion; it was a difficult, subjective word which people felt, and *still* feel, entitled to use based on even the briefest of observations, regardless of the possibility of misinterpretation. If a problematic situation involved a visible power imbalance between people of different ethnicities, it would become a recipe which invited conjecture—the term would lurk pervasively in the minds of all parties present until it was finally unleashed. It was a word which left no room for misunderstanding, becoming an instant, scathing indictment which few dared to rebut. It was a clarion call to action, a sudden, unspoken demand for explanation and justification. Due to the uncoordinated and chaotic way in which it could be liberally applied to anyone or anything, it became a searing brand, a *guilty-until-proven-innocent* charge, virtually impossible to defend against due to the subjective nature of its application. This is not to attempt to deny that racism exists, or to suggest people are not entitled to make such accusations; it does, and they are. Racism is something which still prevails, despite our advances in education and understanding. It is a complicated problem that, due to the significance of religious belief combined with freedom of speech, might never truly be eradicated; it is a complexity which must be understood to be tackled. However, in emotionally charged situations, seldom do people stop to think about the weight the accusation carries, or the inherent dangers of it being used without careful consideration.

Some of the college management had appeared from goodness knows where, stepping in to try to calm the situation. I suddenly realised, watching the fracas on the bank of monitors in the office, that I had been assaulted directly in front of a CCTV camera. There would be crystal-clear footage of the incident, and once the situation had calmed down, I would be vindicated. Even though I had not yet had time to fully digest the situation, I felt upset by the family's knee-jerk condemnation of me. I had never met them before; they knew nothing about me. I had been given no opportunity to explain myself or voice the reasons for my actions. All they had seen was the colour of my

skin, and a conclusion had been reached which, whether by coincidence or design, would detract from the student's actions in breaking the law and assaulting me, instead transforming her into the sole victim of the situation she had herself instigated. I was indignant and exasperated—there had been no discrimination, I was not a racist, and the CCTV videotape would prove that I had done nothing wrong.

After the family were appeased with promises of a full investigation, I was sent home, something I was (naïvely—a developing theme) grateful for at the time. However, as I was in the process of applying to become a police officer, I still felt it was important to report the fact I had been assaulted, and so I stopped in at my local police station on the way home. Thankfully, there was no sign of the Oaf or his crew. A bored-looking officer reluctantly took a written statement from me in a cold, empty room, and an hour or so later I left to head home. I was both mentally and physically drained, and I began walking the two miles back home in the darkness, feeling utterly fed up.

14

I SPENT THE next few days worrying about work, repeatedly checking the burn on my forehead. It was little more than a patch of darkened skin, but that didn't make it any less painful. I heard nothing further from the police, and in the absence of any updates I returned to work. I had been scheduled to attend a meeting with one of the college directors. We only knew each other in passing, although he had always been friendly to me.

I stepped into his office, and he gestured for me to sit down at a small circular table. I did so, and he sat opposite me, adjusting his tie as he began to speak. He outlined that the student's family had lodged an internal complaint, which he would be investigating. He asked me to outline the circumstances of what had occurred, and I gave him the account you have just read. At some point, I became aware that he wasn't making notes, but this never struck me as odd at the time. I think I was so wrapped up in my gratitude, for having someone to offload my worries to, that it didn't occur to me that his plan was already outlined. I explained that the CCTV would show everything, and he feigned a look of confusion.

“There is no CCTV.”

I held my breath. Somewhere, I could feel my heart starting to thump. “Yes... there was a camera right above us.”

“It didn't capture anything.”

This was a lie, an *outrageous* lie. I knew exactly what the camera would have captured, because I had spent part of every working day throughout the last year looking at the bank of monitors in the security office. I knew where it was positioned, where it faced, what it captured, and I knew the tape had been changed that morning—I was the one who did it.

“It must have done. There's a camera. It was right above us.” I started to get desperate, and my mind automatically dropped down a gear, my thoughts picking up speed. If there was no footage, what about my report to the police? Would they not believe me? What if

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the student claimed I had assaulted her? Then I remembered the burn. “She burned me. She stubbed a cigarette out on my head, she tried to shove it in my eye. It burned my forehead; you *must* have seen the burn mark on my head.”

He looked down at the desk. “I didn’t see any burn mark.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. Instinctively, I felt my forehead, the tip of my index finger caressing the texture of the burn above my eyebrow. “Here, look.”

He didn’t look. “I’m sorry, I can’t see anything. There’s no mark there.”

I was flabbergasted. He was a director. He was lying. How could he lie? He was sitting right in front of me. He was lying and pretending none of it had ever happened. What was happening? If, in the account they were crafting, the student had *not* stubbed a cigarette out in my face, were they suggesting I had just randomly shoved a young girl down the steps? Was I being accused of some spontaneous act of violence? I felt my heart thumping in my chest, I could almost hear it in the silence of the room, beating like a drum. Did they think I had pushed her just because I felt like it? Or perhaps because she was *black*? Surely not. Surely to God not.

The director removed his glasses, gently folding them and putting them on the desk. “Look, we know you’ve applied to join the police. Why don’t you just resign? That way, nothing has to get messy, and we’ll still make sure you get a good reference.”

I was being threatened. Blackmailed. I wasn’t even 25 years old, and for the third time in my working life, it was being made abundantly clear that I wasn’t welcome. Not wanted. Was I to blame? Was it life? Circumstance? Bad luck? I just didn’t know. Back then, I didn’t stand up for myself—I generally hated getting into disagreements and opposing people, I was obedient and placid. But it was this kind of dissymmetry in treatment, and the echoes of it I have experienced many times since, which gradually turned me from a silent peacekeeper into a fervent defender of honesty and integrity.

I couldn’t see any point in challenging a decision which had already been made behind closed doors. The VHS containing the relevant footage had probably been thrown away or overwritten. The people who paid my wages were now pretending they couldn’t see any injury, thereby giving validity to the complaint that had been made. I

acknowledged then that wages did *not* imply reciprocal loyalty; the staff on the ground, those working in jobs generally deemed ‘unskilled’, were always the expendable ones. For all the corporate talk of ‘teamwork’ and ‘valued employees’, organisations will never let you forget that there is always someone else waiting to fill your boots.

Once again, my brain became lost in a thick fog of confusion. Eventually, I got up and left the office, then the college. I wandered aimlessly, feeling like a ghost gliding around the city. Although I was free, my journey had no purpose; I was lost and alone.

I felt ashamed. I didn’t want to return home wrapped in the misery of failure yet again, and so I walked until I saw a bookshop. The quiet, peaceful environment drew me in; it was a secluded, safe space which contrasted against the chaos I was trying to escape from. Finding comfort in the familiar, I slowly walked up and down the aisles, running my fingertips along the coloured spines of the books. I began to feel the presence of the same safety net I had surrounded myself in at school. Once again, I didn’t like or understand what was happening to me, and I had been able to withdraw to a place of tranquillity. I was surrounded by millions of words contained within hundreds of thousands of pages. A vast swathe of topics waited to be explored, and I remembered happier times in my younger days, flicking through an encyclopaedia, perhaps opening it at a random page to see what I could learn.

Suddenly, the understanding inside me clicked into place—books were my ticket out of uncomfortable situations; they were something I could either dive into or hide behind. Other people did the same thing, surely? I thought of commuters on the train, oblivious to the real world around them as they waded through the fictional worlds they held in the confines of their hands. I realised that books could be a shield from the wildernesses of life—and for me, the bonus was that they contained information to be tapped into, as and when the reader felt like it. I could pick up a book and absorb its contents or not; the choice would be mine.

Also, I thought, books would *never* judge me, they would never treat me in the same unpleasant, conniving ways that people did. And so, a lasting connection was forged.

“There is no friend as loyal as a book.”

Ernest Hemingway

15

WITH MY LIFE changing direction once again, I picked up some agency work, becoming employed in the product inventory team at a giant electrical warehouse on the outskirts of a market town. I had never done this kind of work before, but I thoroughly enjoyed it.

As time progressed, I started to understand that people seemed to have a love/hate relationship with me; I was, and am, social Marmite. I like the solitude that comes with being left to my own devices, avoiding the myriad complications that accompany human interaction. Yet people who dislike self-sufficiency, in turn, seem to dislike me.

At the start of each shift, I was given a piece of paper with product locations and quantities on it. Then, in my own good time, I had to move from location to location, counting the items that were physically present to determine if the correct number of products (as calculated by the warehouse computer system) were held in stock. I was capable of far more, but the job was simple, easy, and I knew what was expected of me.

Another reason for my enjoyment was because I had to count things. This might sound silly to some, but for me, counting was a form of perfection. There was no confusion or misunderstanding because there could only *ever* be a binary result—nothing more, nothing less. Either the figure on the paperwork was right or it was wrong. In hindsight, this was another warning flag for neurodivergence. But I had no cause to speak about my reasons for enjoying the job, and if I did, it was never to the kinds of people who would have known anything about autism. As such, I remained blind to the relevance of my mental constitution. The more negative encounters I had, irrespective of whether I became a scapegoat or whether people just regarded me as ‘odd’, the quieter and more detached I became. Vice versa, the more interactions I was pushed into meant that I discovered new and necessary ways to fake my way through those interactions, smiling and showing the appropriate behavioural responses just to keep people at bay.

It was while I worked at the warehouse that I received an update from the police service—I had passed the first application stage, the dreaded paper sift. Being honest, I wasn’t sure how to feel—I was excited, yes, but I still had no definite plans to make a career out of policing. I merely wanted to open the door to see what lay behind it. I had now been invited to the next stage, a selection day scheduled to take place in a couple of months’ time. It was to be held at a Centrex (the Central Police Training and Development Authority) premises, located almost smack-bang in the middle of the country. I would have to undertake a maths exam, an English language exam, a writing test, a formal interview, and I would also be participating in some roleplay scenarios. It sounded like a long and taxing day.

I swotted up as best as I could, withdrawing a couple of books from the library and revising GCSE-level mathematics on the internet. I had no problems whatsoever with my English; reading and writing were activities I had always excelled at. If anything would be my downfall, it would be the roleplay scenarios. The concept seemed simple enough—candidates would wait outside a room, where they would be given a cue sheet which explained the role they would be expected to adopt. This could involve anything—favourites included being the manager of a leisure centre, a shopkeeper, a receptionist, or a security guard. The candidate would then enter the room to be faced with a scenario being played out by actors: it would be the candidate’s job to successfully deal with the situation unfolding before them while a clock counted down the minutes. Of course, much of the marking was entirely subjective, and relied upon the candidate verbally demonstrating that they had considered the many possible outcomes, even if they were not to be used in resolving the scenario.

As it so happened, I breezed through the assessment day—even though my trouser zip broke when I arrived, and I had to spend the entire day trying to pretend there *wasn’t* a gaping hole in my outfit through which my boxer shorts could quite obviously be seen. I received my results several weeks later, which stated that—to my surprise—my score for communication skills was one of the highest that Centrex had received. I was now onto the next stage: a medical assessment to be conducted in the Occupational Health building at my own force’s county headquarters. It involved eyesight and hearing

tests, weight and height measurements, and a blood pressure check. I was regarded as fighting fit and passed with no trouble.

In total, the application process took around twelve months. There was a lot of waiting around, and at the time (unlike now) the police service was a job in fairly high demand. The Labour government's 'Police: Could You?' publicity campaign had begun to raise the profile of the service dramatically, and I was to be one of the 'new' generation of bobbies, drawn from the rank-and-file of the public who had no prior connections to the police, or who had never previously considered policing as a career move. The aim was to pump fresh water into a stagnant pond, meaning the police service would finally be steered away from the dark ages in which the Oaf and his colleagues roamed, free from objection or oversight.

As the final element of the application process, I received a form with a map of my local county on it, split into five divisions. Five empty boxes had been printed on the attached sheet of paper, and I was asked to list my order of preference for the divisions in which I wanted to work. I had no wish to risk going anywhere near the division in which the Oaf worked, and so I immediately placed it last upon the list. I ordered the others in preference of what I thought would be interest and opportunity, rather than journey time. I reasoned that the pay would be the same no matter where I was destined to head. I popped the form in the envelope and sent it back. A few weeks later, I received my starting date. Like thousands of others, I was off to join the College of Policing.

Oh, and as for the physical assault that ended my security career—I was never re-contacted by my local police; I never heard anything about it again.

16

MY TRAINING WAS due to take place at the same Centrex training centre where the assessment day had been held. It was a peculiar but homely place with a vague military feel, even though the government seemed keen to move away from the police having any connotations with being militaristic. To that end, the police force had become the police *service*, the insistence upon bulled boots was slowly being faded out, commanding officers no longer carried swagger sticks, and parades were becoming a thing of the past. Many commentators declare that policing standards have slipped, and whilst I wholeheartedly agree with this observation, I do not believe that blame for the demise of the police service can be signified by, or rest upon, such inconsequential changes. Like the NHS, the police service has been badly managed by successive governments for many, many years.

My training was due to last for twelve weeks, having recently been reduced from a longer (and therefore more costly) fifteen-week course. The course was residential, meaning officers would be assigned rooms within blocks, and would live, eat, and sleep on the site. There was a bar, and we were free to return home at weekends if we so wished. However, strict rules were in place regarding behaviour: there would be *no* drunken shenanigans.

I was placed in a block along with officers from six different police forces. We were a peculiar bunch, and among our interests we had an Egyptologist, a black-belt martial artist, and a hippy. From a religious perspective, we had a Catholic, a Muslim and a Sikh, along with a handful of atheists and agnostics. Despite our wide range of differences, we quickly grew close and got along wonderfully.

Very few photographs exist of the interior of the Centrex training centres. When I packed my belongings, I decided to take my digital camera with me. This was before the days of mobile phones with integrated cameras, and once again, as an autism red flag, I didn't stop to think how other people might react. I have always enjoyed photography, and while everyone else was busy studying, I found I

could recite many of the criminal laws verbatim. So, needing less revision time than my colleagues, I would often wander around taking photographs, both on and off the site, much to the annoyance of the officers in charge.

One morning, I found myself being summoned to the wood-panelled office of the Chief Inspector, located in the main building. Centrex was not a police force per se but still operated with the same institutional ranking system. The teaching staff was comprised of a few civilian trainers, but for the most part, was made up of serving police officers on secondment from their home force. At the time, around 450 staff were on temporary transfer from the many police forces around England and Wales.

The Chief Inspector cut straight to the chase, and I was shocked to find myself being accused of being an undercover BBC reporter. A year or so earlier, undercover journalist Mark Daly had joined the ranks of the Greater Manchester Police. He attended training at the Centrex training centre in Warrington, Cheshire, and filmed covert footage of many of recruits openly expressing racist attitudes towards ethnic minority groups. The documentary left the public reeling and angry when it was broadcast, and rightly so. The Home Office was embarrassed, and senior police officers were switched onto high alert. They were desperate to avoid any further negative publicity or embarrassment, and with my interest in journalism, my background working for newspapers, and my inquisitive, probing nature, it seemed I was considered just the type to make a follow-up documentary. The Chief Inspector ordered me to delete any photographs or video footage I had taken.

I returned to my room to fetch my laptop, where I quickly copied the media folder, pasting a duplicate deep into the Windows directory and marking it as 'Hidden'. At the time, this was a laughably flimsy attempt at concealing the files, but it worked. I carried the laptop back to the Chief Inspector's office, placing it on his desk. As he watched, hawk-like, I showed him the folder on the desktop marked 'Photographs' and opened it, scrolling briefly through the content to prove there was absolutely no threat to the integrity or reputation of the police service. I then closed the folder, dragging it over to the recycle bin. The icon duly changed, indicating it was 'full', and I right-clicked and selected the 'Empty Recycle Bin now' option. The

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computer made a brief noise of confirmation, and the bin icon flicked back to being empty.

I glanced at the Chief Inspector, who seemed to relax a little. Perhaps he felt his job was safer now he had witnessed my collection of contraband photographs being deleted. “Don’t let it happen again,” he sternly warned as I walked out.

“Bollocks,” I muttered under my breath as the door shut.

It was at that moment I decided to dedicate the remainder of my spare time to filming my own mockumentary as a memento, which I would nickname *The Centrex Policeman*.

“Unseen in the background, Fate was quietly
slipping lead into the boxing-glove.”

P. G. Wodehouse
Very Good, Jeeves!

17

AS WE REACHED week ten of the course, I looked back. Aside from one of the tutors being caught pursuing relationships with female students (he was sent back to his home force), it had been relatively problem-free, and I realised I had aced pretty much everything. Finally, perhaps, I had found a career in which I could excel. There were only two weeks left to go before the big ‘passing out’ parade, a term I have never really understood. Why would anyone pass out at a parade? Metaphorical language is occasionally lost on me.

Returning home that weekend, I discovered a letter from my local police force. This must be it—I was about to find out where I would begin my new career. With trepidation, I ripped the envelope open (I have never been able to open a letter neatly) and, unfolding the paper, I skimmed over the printed text. My stomach lurched in desperation, sending a stinging bout of acid swirling around my gut.

I had been sent to work in the same division as the Oaf. Worse still, not just in the same division—I had been assigned to work at the *exact same station*.

How had this happened? There were five divisions, and I had intentionally placed the Oaf’s division last on my list of desired places to work. Then, there must have been an average of six different police stations per division. I was no good at calculating probability and odds, but I estimated my chances of being assigned to the same station as the Oaf were less than 5%, and that was *without* preference being taken into account. The news felt like I had rolled a six-sided die and got a seven; it should have been impossible.

I clutched the letter in my hands. I felt like a ship lost at sea, and wondered how on earth I would navigate my way back to safety.

18

THE NEWS PUT a distinct dampener on my final two weeks of training. I had really got into the swing of things, and my enthusiasm for the job had grown no end. Putting some of my less pleasant work experiences behind me, I had come to consider it a fresh start, and under no circumstances would I return to the Oaf's dark, dingy police station. I resolutely refused to consider the Oaf a colleague—we were made of a completely different moral fibre.

I began to make some calls, quickly discovering that nobody at the police headquarters wanted to help me. I spoke to staff at the regional training headquarters, who could only suggest finding another officer to trade places with. To my chagrin, everyone else seemed to have struck lucky—they had been assigned new, shiny police stations in busy areas where they had been contacted in advance, being welcomed with open arms. In contrast, I had been assigned to work at an outdated dungeon full of domineering browbeats.

With no other option left, I resorted to writing a letter of complaint.* In my letter, I outlined my reasoning for requesting an immediate transfer, which led up to the final paragraph in which I disclosed brief details of the Oaf's physical assault. I stressed that I did *not* wish to report a crime, I simply wanted to let sleeping dogs lie and start my career somewhere else. Clearly the letter had the desired effect, as I received a written response, albeit only brief, the following week: I had been transferred to a different station in a different division. No mention was made of the allegations I had outlined.

With this news in mind, my final week of training passed by in a blur. I remained bemused by the idea of a passing out parade, and upon discovering out that all officers were required to hire (and thus pay an

* I had kept a copy of the letter in a file for many, many years, lest it ever be needed. One day in 2023, only a few months before my arrest, I fed the letter through our shredder. I made the fatal mistake of believing I was finally clear of the police service, never realising the depths to which the police service will stoop to ensure they never forget you.

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exorbitant price for) a formal dress outfit for the occasion, I immediately refused to attend. If the pride we had in our brand-new uniform was not good enough for the event, I found that to be a sad indictment of the service I was now an official part of.

I was joined by one other officer in shunning the parade, and we sat alone in our block, talking about Zen philosophy and sipping green tea, which, like me, is not everybody's favourite cup.



PART 2

Navigating the Shadows

19

I HAD HIGH hopes for my new station—we had a Scenes of Crime* office, a CID office, a Child Abuse Investigation team, a Neighbourhood Team (and their newly introduced, civilian counterparts, PCSOs), and we even had a Homicide department. The Response policing team, which I and all other new recruits were a part of, was also based out of the same station, which even had a gym and a canteen. However, the gym was not cleaned or maintained (plus it remained out of bounds unless you paid into the police sporting fund), and the canteen closed its doors a month after I arrived. I managed one meal of fish and chips, then they stopped serving forever. Talk about starting off on the wrong foot.

The first thing that struck me was—except for many of the Response team—how *old* everyone was. I do not mean that in a disparaging way, I mention it because I believe it was indicative of the underlying reasons much of the police service had finally gone stale in the '90s. Response policing was a time-consuming, stressful, and dangerous job. Everyone always loved it when they first started, but after the first few years, the adrenaline quickly wore off and the stress was something many officers grew to resent. Due to the nature of the role, Response policing needed sharp thinkers, and if you were good at it, your chances of moving elsewhere reduced dramatically. In addition, there is only so much negativity you can be exposed to before burnout sets in. Knowing you were turning up to work every single day only to arrest people who hated you, wanted to fight you, and who would then openly lie about you, quickly became a mentally and physically draining experience.

Consequently, officers stuck on the Response team would often seek to transfer elsewhere; however, certainly in my own force, the best roles—divisional support teams, dog handlers, firearms, CID—

* I much preferred the days it was referred to as 'SOCO', before the gradual replacement with its American counterpart 'CSI'.

were few and far between. Behind the scenes, they were considered as exclusive ‘jobs for the boys’. In my first few years I watched very few officers successfully transfer off the Response team—those that did inevitably had a connection somewhere, usually a family member higher up the ranking structure who could verify that they were indeed ‘a good ‘un’. Ergo, if an officer was lucky enough to transfer into a different role or department, they tended to stay there, with many comfortably living out their careers while they ambled steadily towards their well-funded retirement. This caused an immense backlog in the number of officers seeking development opportunities, and typically, many of the less-successful officers would finally give up and drift away, transferring to different Home Office forces, where they hoped the opportunities would be more plentiful.

Meanwhile, I knuckled down to get on with the job, finding that I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was confidently competent at pretty much everything, and I loved it all. Whether it was the psychological aspect of interviewing, the ability to make Sherlock Holmes-style deductions when conducting investigations, or the thrills of stalking criminal prey when on patrol during the night shifts, I threw myself into policing with great enthusiasm. Admittedly, it could be complicated at times, but unlike other jobs, it was rigidly structured. The laws of the country were clear to understand, and whilst the British have a peculiar knack for passing legislation which can be unhelpfully subjective (more on that later), the existence of ‘test cases’ helped to hone both expectations and understanding when it came to arrest and prosecution. There were clear guidelines for almost everything.

I quickly made a name for myself as a dedicated and proactive officer, and I started to receive letters of thanks on a regular basis. On more than one occasion, I was proud to be referred to as a “credit to the force”. But for reasons which I could never quite understand, my shift Inspector seemed to detest me. Eventually, the feeling became mutual. Like the Oaf, he was a crusty relic, stuck in the past, clutching onto the days when officers snapped to attention, saluted, and kept pristine pocket notebooks. It seemed that if you weren’t an avid cricket fan or rugby supporter, your views weren’t worth considering. A handful of us nicknamed him *The Dark Lord* behind his back. He turned down every request I submitted and every development opportunity I asked for. Could I have training to drive the police vans? No. Could we

have sat-navs (an emerging technology at the time) for the police cars? No. Could we invest in some equipment to safely tackle loose or dangerous dogs? No. Could I please go on a secondment to work with the intelligence unit? No. There was never an explanation, just No.

Back when I first joined the force, officers were even prevented from accessing the internet. Due to my background working with technology, I was a whizz at producing documents and maps, and finding that web access was granted on a case-by-case basis for 'legitimate use only', it didn't take me long to establish how useful the Street View website might be—to review the locations of burglaries to establish trends and patterns, to gather intelligence before executing warrants, or to plot the course of vehicles when investigating road traffic collisions. Could we have access to the Street View website? No. The Dark Lord told me to draw on photocopies of the dog-eared station A-Z like everybody else did. Believe it or not, this practice was still being followed over a decade later in 2017 when I was dismissed, just like the read-aloud briefings I experienced as a Special.

Whilst there was (thankfully) nobody like the Oaf at our station, that didn't make some of my experiences any more pleasant. Within my first year of duty, I noticed my own team had a bad habit of 'de-kitting' up to half an hour before the end of the shift. Stab-vests would be removed, boots would be unlaced, and duty belts slung on desks. It was a practice I never engaged in, and I always wondered what would happen if an emergency occurred. I promptly found out when, at quarter-to-midnight, a burglary was reported taking place directly opposite the police station. I was the only officer dressed for duty, and ran out of the station doors on foot, flying like the wind. I disturbed two masked individuals, who immediately fled the scene, splitting off in two separate directions. I missed one by a centimetre, feeling the fabric of his hooded top slide over my fingertips. By the time my colleagues had put their uniform back together and fallen out of the station's front doors, the burglars had long gone.

Elsewhere, it seemed washing your car on taxpayer time was a force-wide problem. Our station had one insufferable officer who would vacuum, shampoo, and rinse his prized red Volkswagen Golf, shifting the police cars from their covered, restricted parking area to allow his own car to dry naturally. We almost came to blows when I returned to the station and found there was nowhere to park my

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patrol car; the officer had parked his Golf directly across the two remaining spaces reserved for marked police vehicles.

Then there was the civilian Property Manager, a terse and miserable man who wore half-moon glasses and absolutely *hated* being disturbed. It was no wonder, for he wound up being dismissed for stealing the very same property he was supposed to be looking after—curiously, no criminal charges were forthcoming. I also remember an occasion where one police officer, thankfully from a different shift, angrily challenged me to a fight in the station car park after I objected to his lewd behaviour towards a female officer.

Problems aside, I developed a good rapport with some of the Special Constables at the station, wishing to extend the hand of friendship that had never been offered to me. Alas, even they were not without drama. On a summer Saturday evening, one Special unleashed an entire canister of CS spray at a 15-year-old girl waiting at a bus stop. Another Special drove a police vehicle into a local car park with a low-hanging steel warning barrier. The blue lights were torn clean off the car roof, and the officer returned to the station sheepishly claiming the lights had blown off in a gust of wind. Another Special, a young woman whose day job was as an administrator for the force's Internal Investigations Unit (the IIU), would frequently invite on-duty colleagues round to her flat for a cup of tea, before eagerly showing them her mammoth coffee-table book *The Encyclopaedia of Sex*, with a nod and a wink.

As the influx of new, younger Response officers gradually began to arrive, it seemed to be that the police service was changing, but then an incident would occur which proved that the poisonous old ways were still alive and well. I realised that many of the problematic officers hadn't yet retired—they'd simply been shifted sideways or had climbed the ladder to higher positions.

One of the Inspectors at our station approached me one day, quietly telling me that he'd heard I was good with computers. I modestly suggested I had a reasonable depth of knowledge, and, looking around furtively, he asked whether I would be prepared to download him some pornography. His request knocked me for six. I would later discover via the rumour-mill that he and his wife, also an Inspector, would hold 'special' parties in their rural home. Needless to say, they had their own way of playing pin the tail on the donkey.

Apparently, this was fairly common among the higher ranks, but regardless, in a few years time, the couple would find themselves being dismissed for gross misconduct.

Elsewhere, in the early hours of one night shift, I was on mobile patrol. I was on my own and was floating around the roads leading to an attractive country park. I had discovered the area was a magnet for all kinds of weird and wonderful behaviour, and only a few months earlier, I had stumbled across a car full of men with balaclavas and hammers. The driver had warning markers on the Police National Computer (PNC) for possessing firearms, and it transpired the group was kitting up to commit an aggravated burglary at a nearby pub once it closed for the night.

Anyway, as I approached a junction, a dark-coloured car shot out at speed. The driver hadn't paid any attention to the road signs and hurtled off up the road at a rate of knots. I dropped down a gear, accelerating to catch up. As my police car loomed into view in the driver's rear-view mirror, the car casually slowed to a more acceptable speed. The driver even began indicating prior to turning into junctions, and I could see a pair of eyes periodically glancing up and over at me in the rear-view mirror.

I asked the radio operator to check the number plate—the car had a local keeper, it was taxed, and it was insured. As the driver had amended their behaviour accordingly, I was satisfied and lost interest. We all drove fast when we were in a hurry, and I saw no reason to penalise someone for something I had occasionally done myself on an empty road. So, I slowly peeled off in a different direction, calling it a night and returning to the station to do some paperwork before going off duty.

Half an hour later, I was mid-sentence in a report when someone shouted my name. They gestured, pointing at the nearest desk phone, which I picked up, waiting for the 'click' as they transferred the call through. I found myself speaking to a haughty Detective Sergeant, who demanded to know why I had performed a PNC check around 30 minutes ago on a vehicle. I asked if they were speaking about the small, dark-coloured car—they confirmed that they were.

Not thinking twice, I briefly explained that the driver appeared to be speeding and had shot out of a junction clearly signed 'Give Way' whilst I was approaching. Whilst I needed no excuse to conduct a

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check on the car's number plate, my consideration that the driver had committed moving traffic offences gave me increased reason to check the registration, particularly as I may have gone ahead and conducted a traffic stop to engage with the driver.

The DS waited for me to stop speaking, and then berated me for conducting the check in the first place. It transpired the car was a personal vehicle belonging to one of her team. The officer had not long left his house and had apparently been driving to work. The Sergeant told me, in no uncertain terms, that I had absolutely no business checking a vehicle belonging to one of her staff; she ordered me not to repeat the same mistake again. I didn't know what to say—I was utterly flabbergasted at the sheer stupidity of her demand. How was I supposed to know the car belonged to a police officer? On a more serious note, in her desperation to flex her supervisory muscles, the Detective Sergeant had completely contravened the rules for operation of the PNC: *rules for thee, but not for me.*

This was the first of many similar occasions which left me baffled. The police had a habit of giving you a well-defined spectrum in which to operate, but would periodically decide that, by you operating within the very same spectrum they had just outlined, you had done something wrong. There was then, therefore, no logical way to explain *why* you had done *what* you had done. Given that the goalposts had suddenly changed without your knowledge, admitting that you had done exactly what you were told was now tantamount to admitting guilt, and therefore any kind of admission naturally invited punishment.

I was soon to discover that politics also played a significant part in determining when it was likely to be decided that you were guilty of spontaneous wrongdoing.

It could all be very confusing indeed.

“There are three kinds of lies. Lies, damned lies and statistics.”

Mark Twain

20

ONE SUNNY SUNDAY afternoon around the summer of 2010, a colleague and I were dispatched to a domestic incident. Both parties had each dialled 999 (not in itself an uncommon occurrence) and were waiting in separate locations. There was always a rush to be the first in every two-sided dispute to ring the police—the first one to report the matter is often regarded, both procedurally and systematically, as the ‘victim’ in the affair. Domestic disagreements are the most common case in point.

We arrived, pulling up to a beautiful house in the countryside. We discovered that the couple were living apart and were in the process of getting divorced; the wife had packed some boxes containing her soon-to-be-ex-husband’s possessions. He had turned up, by prior arrangement, to collect his belongings, and had been in the process of placing them in his car when his wife suddenly declared that she could not find her passport. She promptly accused her husband of stealing it, an action he vehemently denied.

The disagreement became complicated by the fraught underlying emotions and existing discord, and neither party would back down. The wife launched herself into her husband, pushing past him to search his car. Angered, he pulled her out. Therefore, the first call had been received from the wife, who was alleging theft and assault, and the second call had been received from the husband, who was not only protesting his innocence, but also expressing concerns about his wife assaulting him first.

When we arrived, we found the two parties already separated, and thankfully, calm. Upon entering the house, I spoke first with the wife. It was a beautiful home, and I felt sorry that there was such significant turmoil in their lives that it resulted in them choosing to part ways. She was clearly very stressed, and quickly admitted that she might have made a mistake. She explained that, during the process of her packing her husband’s belongings up, her passport could have either fallen into, or been mistakenly placed in, one of the boxes

dutifully collected by her husband and placed in his car, however she wasn't sure. She hadn't felt comfortable enough to ask him to bring the boxes back inside so she could check.

I popped out the front door to speak with the husband, a polite and respectable chap, who was also quite fraught—understandable in the circumstances. I explained his wife's assumption, and we began to open and search the boxes. There, sitting in plain view inside the third box we checked, was her passport.

Relieved, the husband waited while I ferried the passport back inside. The wife was grateful, and quickly became apologetic for calling us out, but as it was a domestic-related incident, there was a whole heap of paperwork to complete—a four-page report, a two-page additional information report, and then an unwieldy domestic risk assessment, which stretched to nine pages by itself. As the initial call had come from the wife, we completed the paperwork with her. In a silent mutual agreement, neither party wished to pursue any allegations of theft or assault, and so I allowed the husband to get on his way. We shook hands as he departed, his car pulling off and slowly disappearing down the adjacent country lane.

This might, on the face of it, sound straightforward. However, a particular complication arose when the police had to 'mark off' an incident, in essence providing an update justifying the outcome. When a call was received in the control room, a call-taker logged the details on a computerised incident report, which was automatically assigned an incident number. In the event that the incident related to a report of a crime, if the attending officers verified that a crime had taken place (or could find no evidence to the contrary), the incident number would subsequently be used to generate a crime number. The two would become interlinked, and the incident would be 'closed', whilst further investigations would take place under the crime reference number. This was in line with the National Crime Recording Standards (NCRS), which had been introduced by the government in 2003.

Conversely, this meant that an incident log would remain 'open' until it received an appropriate update from the attending officers. Had a crime taken place or not? The police service was never too bothered by incident numbers but had an intense love/hate relationship with crime numbers. The reason for this was simple: adherence to the NCRS was *supposed* to standardise the practice of recording crime across

England and Wales, so the resultant statistics could be used by the government as a tool to measure police force effectiveness.

At the time, each crime that occurred was allocated its own crime number. For example, if a victim were to be assaulted during a road-rage incident, with the offending party returning minutes later to smash the victim's car wing mirror, the Home Office previously expected *two* crime numbers to be recorded—the first for assault, the second for criminal damage. The obvious inference here was that the more crime numbers were being generated, the more crime was occurring in each county. This was a simple enough observation, but the numbers could then be used to provide week-on-week, month-on-month or even year-on-year measurements. Was reported crime going up? Down? Why? Could any trends be identified? Police in the United States had been doing something similar since 1994, when the NYPD introduced the COMPSTAT software. Now, the trend was starting to spread overseas.

Of course, no matter which political party was in power, one of the most consistent promises made by the government was to reduce crime. Many people will remember one of the most memorable political mottos used by Blair's Labour government which came into power in 1997. The party promised to be 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. Naturally, the Labour reforms meant that the police service was being kicked into touch. However, there were only two substantive ways that the police service could demonstrate success, and both of them involved statistics.

The first way was by reducing the overall instances of crime, and the fastest way to achieve this result was simply to *record fewer crime numbers*. The process began with the Home Office heaping pressure on Chief Constables, who began finding their own force statistics being compared with those of their geographic neighbours, or, worse still, other forces which covered counties of similar sizes and demographics. This then allowed uncomfortable questions to be asked by government inspectors... *Given the obvious similarities between force A and force B, why was force A recording less crime than force B? What was force B doing wrong? Were force B's working practices ineffective? If things do not improve, does the Chief Constable of force B need removing from post?*

Understandably unhappy about the risk this posed to their careers, it didn't take long for Chief Constables to pass the baton. Since

time immemorial, it has been recognised that shit rolls downhill, and Chief Superintendents, then Chief Inspectors, soon found themselves being held personally accountable for the number of crimes being recorded—seemingly arbitrary figures which, in many cases, could not be accurately predicted. It didn't stop there, though. Analysis was broken down to divisional levels, then to station levels, then again to specific 'beat' areas. Eventually, analysis would occur at street level, where local area commanders could identify crime 'hotspots', holding local Beat Officers to account. So, for a period of time, crime numbers became universally hated, and certainly within my own force, various 'fiddles' were developed and adopted to try to beat the Home Office counting system. This wasn't anything new—a report from the HMIC published in 1999, six years before I joined the police, commented that crime recording was "perhaps the major area of malpractice".*

So, the buck had to stop somewhere, and the change began at ground level: police officers slowly stopped recording crime numbers wherever it was possible to manufacture an excuse to do so. This usually happened when the police were called to deal with people who, according to Home Office rules, required a crime number, but would find themselves privately being considered by the attending officers as 'unfit' to receive one. The most obvious example were drunks. Turning up to the aftermath of a pub fight and finding some poor soul with a broken nose, split lip, and black eye, according to the Home Office rules, the injured party (IP) should have received a crime number for assault. In many instances, what the IP actually received was a congenial pat on the back, a suggestion that they 'go home and sleep it off', and warm reassurances that they could still call 101 to report the matter the following morning. There was a definite correlation between how nice the police were and the amount of work they had to do. In the meantime (and usually out of earshot) the incident log would be marked off that the victim was 'not in a fit state' or was otherwise 'unable to confirm' whether a crime had taken place. Worse still was the not *entirely* dishonest explanation that the victim had injuries which 'could have been' consistent with an accident or a fall.

* HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (1999), *Police Integrity: England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Securing and maintaining public confidence* (London: Home Office Communication Directorate), p. 19.

In the words of Mark Twain, “It may have happened, it may not have happened, but it *could* have happened.”

Vagrants and drug addicts were another group to suffer, as were children, and the elderly, particularly those in care or suffering with dementia. Officers became quick to latch on to any excuse which could provide semi-plausible justification as to why the injured party was unable to verify whether they had been the victim of a crime, even if this was plainly obvious at the time of officers’ attendance. The excuses piled up: the victim was ‘not of sound mind’, or ‘refused to confirm’ whether a recordable offence had taken place. I have clear memories of raging disagreements breaking out over the latter, and in my own force, senior officers began distributing copy-paste wording to be used when marking off incidents, to ensure the log was ‘Home Office-compatible’ lest an audit occur, and the force’s approach be rumbled.

Collectively, this approach became known as ‘batting it off’, a method which had existed for years, but which periodically shifted shape to fit changing standards. As expected, once the heat of the moment had passed, many victims never bothered to make a second attempt at reporting their crimes. As for those that did, the newly recorded statistic simply became somebody else’s problem to investigate. Usually, by the time the victim had picked up the phone, the attending officers were fast asleep in their beds. It was for these reasons that Saturday and Sunday day shifts became particularly dreaded, as there would regularly be an influx of crimes to record as people woke up battered and bruised, wanting to ‘follow the attending officer’s advice’ and report what had happened to them the night before. The public were simply none the wiser that they had *also* been a victim of an attempted institutional fob-off.

The use of different tactics to avoid recording crimes became commonplace. Where jobs could not be batted off permanently, the incidents would turn into a game of ‘pass-the-parcel’. One particularly unscrupulous method involved attending a complainant’s home and knocking at the door incredibly quietly. Naturally, when nobody answered, the officers would unobtrusively slip a calling card through the letterbox, featuring just the incident number. By the time the complainant found the card and called the control room, it would be highly likely that the original officers would be tied up with something else, and different officers would have to attend. By avoiding leaving

their names on the calling card, the officers were almost guaranteeing their name wouldn't end up tied to the crime in future.

Higher up the organisational structure, other tactics were quietly approved. Downgrading of crimes to less serious offences became commonplace, particularly in CID, and this would usually occur if the victim had no understanding or grasp of criminal law. The most common example was the downgrading of robbery to theft. In instances where the victim wasn't going to be deceived so easily, two less serious crimes were still considered better than one serious one, and so the victim would receive two crime numbers—one for theft, the other for common assault. CID would then be able to push the crimes back to the Response teams to investigate.

Then, somewhere along the way, someone green-lit the idea for 'grouping' crime numbers. This meant that, in cases of multiple crimes occurring during a single incident, only the most serious crime of the bunch was recorded. So, the discovery of a known burglar who was found to be in possession of tools to go equipped, as well as possessing a knife and some cannabis, would mean that only the crime of going equipped would be recorded. All other offences were conveniently ignored and would stay ignored unless the crime was going to be 'detected'.

This leads neatly on to the second way for police forces to demonstrate success—by 'detecting' each crime that had been recorded. A crime could only be detected if (i) a crime number already existed, and (ii) an offender was to be held formally responsible for committing that crime, by being fined, cautioned, or charged to court. In a handful of cases, death could not even provide a satisfactory escape, with some crimes being detected under the category of the offender dying 'before justice could be administered'.

Police forces would therefore begin to develop conflicting interests—they hated recording crimes but loved to detect them. A peculiar system began to evolve, where some forces, including my own, would hold off recording crimes until it was certain that a named offender would be held responsible. At that point, a mad rush would occur to simultaneously record, and instantly detect, as many crimes as possible. Operating this way provided the best of both worlds—crime numbers stayed low, but the number of detected crimes increased.

As one might expect, the periodic drives to detect crimes resulted in the setting of targets. Commanding officers began pushing for each team to detect a certain number of crimes each month, which resulted in officers taking a wholly over-zealous approach to their methods of policing. Crimes that were typically lengthy to investigate or harder to detect became of virtually no interest. For example, nobody wanted to attend reports of fraud. Instead of spending night shifts patrolling residential areas to deter burglars, officers began to patrol local parks and beauty spots, in the hope of finding someone in possession of cannabis. This approach, however, did not always go according to plan. It might have been found that a regular cannabis user, having been stopped and searched, did not possess any identifiable quantity of the drug. However, in the drive to detect ‘easy’ crime, it became increasingly likely that the cannabis user would find his pockets or wallet being turned out for specks of green-coloured dust. This dust would then be brushed into an evidence bag, and the individual would be quietly cautioned or fined for possession of a controlled drug. Importantly, this forensic-level gathering of evidence did *not* occur if the offender had already been dealt with for possession of cannabis, as the matter would need to progress to an interview and charge, at which point it became too much effort, and furthermore, if the particles of green dust were to be discovered by the prosecutor, the ruse would be discovered. This sounds too incredible to be true, but I watched officers do it with my own eyes.

There were all sorts of other knock-on effects which, in the non-police world, would never even be considered. For example, this dogged pursuit of detectable crime caused an uptick in noble cause corruption. Arrested suspects were legally entitled to free and independent legal advice, but whilst travelling to the custody suite, officers would calculate the probability of the suspect receiving a simple caution were they to make a ‘full and frank’ admission to the offence. When confused suspects, inevitably first-time arrestees, would ask “Do I need a solicitor?” the officers, without openly denying the suspect their lawful right, became prone to artfully suggesting matters would be faster and simpler without one.

Of course, it didn’t take long for the statisticians of the Home Office to get wise to the manipulative methods being employed by the police service, and they would routinely update the standard ‘counting

rules' to try and combat the emerging problems. A House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee was formed in 2013/14, after a serving police officer, PC James Patrick, blew the whistle on the fiddling of recorded crime numbers by the Metropolitan Police. The report, entitled 'Caught red-handed: Why we can't count on Police Recorded Crime statistics',* was fairly damning, suggesting "declining standards of compliance" and "a gradual erosion of compliance with the NCRS, such that a growing number of crimes reported to the police are not being captured." The report blamed performance pressures associated with the setting of targets, such as increasing detection rates, which it regarded as "perverse incentives."

Consequently, the crime recording rules grew and grew, and the most recent circular (2023/24) now runs to 69 pages of complex instructions, catering for almost every conceivable instance. Even these amendments, made many years after the Labour reforms, go a long way to highlighting similar problems that exist in the police service today. The latest circular instructs the police to only record *one* crime on each occasion a victim comes forward. It also limits the number of crimes which can be recorded in relation to receipt of threatening messages, which caused specific concerns that official statistics relating to domestic abuse would become distorted.

Due to the government's frequent amendments to the counting rules, complications eventually arose when someone reported an incident in which they made an allegation of a crime having taken place, but the attending officers marked off the incident with no crime having occurred. Depending on which way the wind was blowing at the time, either the attending officers (i) would not be questioned about their mark off, as they had successfully avoided increasing the number of crimes in the locality, or (ii) would be rapidly hauled in front of a commanding officer as, depending on the circumstances of the report, they had failed to take advantage of a situation in which a simple crime might have been easily detected. There was never any easy way to guess the outcome.[†]

* The report can still be viewed on the Parliament.uk website, currently at:
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpubadm/760/76002.htm>

[†] I refer you back to my comment at the end of the previous chapter about senior officers arbitrarily moving the goalposts.

PART 2: NAVIGATING THE SHADOWS



Figure 1: My class at the Centrex training centre.



Figure 2: The obligatory *pose-with-car* photo at my new police station.

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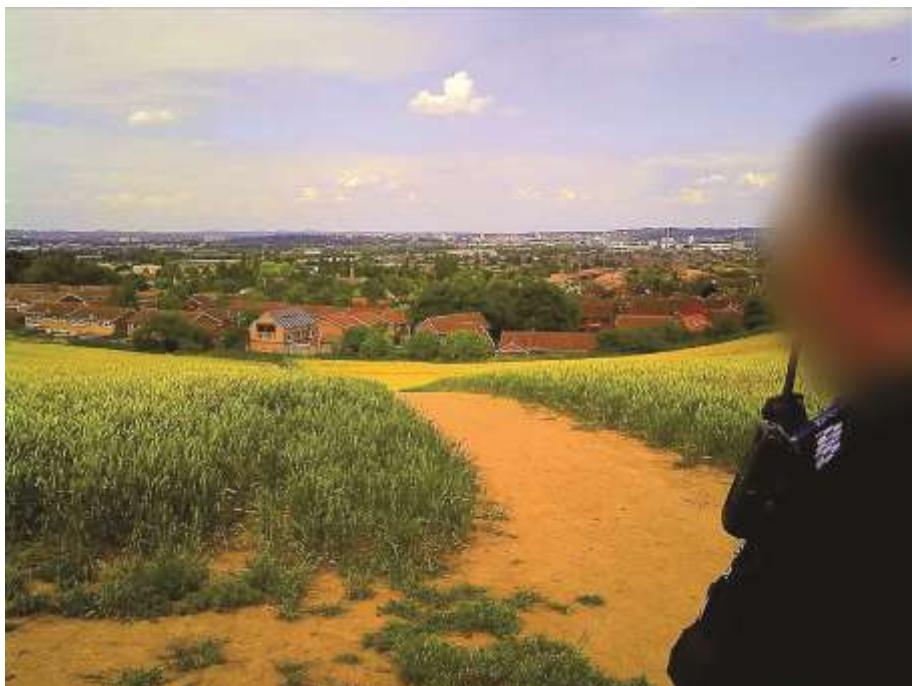


Figure 3: Who could complain at scenery like this?



Figure 4: Or this?

Now consider the domestic incident I outlined earlier. When the wife first telephoned the police, she reported that her passport had been stolen. The husband alleged he had been assaulted. The wife also alleged she had been assaulted, albeit by being manhandled away from the car. We turned up and discovered the ‘theft’ was a genuine mistake—it was not physically possible for the husband to pack and seal his own boxes as he had not been present at the time—but behind the scenes, there was now a considerable problem. Allegations had been made, and after we arrived, the incident had been marked off with the update that no criminal offences had taken place.

Unbeknown to me at the time, this had created a flag on the system; a statistical blip which indicated an anomaly requiring further investigation. As was the fashion with potentially problematic incidents, I had marked off the domestic incident in great detail, updating that the passport had been recovered in a box of packaged belongings, and that it had *not* been stolen as the wife first thought, it had simply been misplaced during the process of her packing her husband’s property for his subsequent removal. Regarding the assault, it was a genuine update that nobody wished to verify or pursue any of their earlier allegations. At the time everything seemed fine, and the incident log was closed.

The following week, however, I received an email from a Chief Inspector who was based in the neighbouring town. To say the email was curt would be an understatement—it contained nothing other than a date and time, typed out above his email signature. I surmised that I was being summoned to his office, and in the finest example of the mountain not going to Mohammed, I was forced to undertake a twenty-five-minute drive to his base station, the appointment being at his convenience, not mine. I could tell from the tactless way it had been constructed that the invite was a pure power-trip—everyone on the front lines of the police service was busy, and I failed to see why he couldn’t have instigated a conversation by phone instead.

I arrived at the station, climbing the stairs and wandering down pristine corridors until I found the office in question. A partially frosted glass pane obscured the view, and I knocked.

“Come in.”

I obediently entered. The Chief Inspector neither met my eye nor acknowledged me. I stood in silence while he tapped away on his

computer keyboard. I noticed he was surrounded by wall-mounted certificates bearing his name. Everything, including his set of expensive-looking golf clubs carefully positioned in the corner, suggested an unhealthily oversized ego; his office reminded me of those who live alone, yet fill their homes with photos of themselves.

After a few minutes, he turned to me, his smile disarmingly warm. In a lilting Irish accent, he invited me to sit down. He began making pleasant small-talk, his gestures open and his expression friendly. He asked me how long I had been a police officer and whether I enjoyed the role. In due course, I would come to recognise this as something I refer to as the ‘scorpion technique’. Under the hypnotic guise of being friendly, the alpha disarms the beta, lulling them into a false sense of security to elicit some personal information. When the time is right, the alpha strikes with speed and ferocity, stabbing the beta with the information they had only recently surrendered. The result is a shock—the beta feels more attacked and vulnerable than they otherwise would have done, because the alpha used their own information to strike them with.

I answered him truthfully, explaining that I had been a police officer for a couple of years so far, and yes, I thoroughly enjoyed the job. He smiled, showing the edges of his pearly white teeth. Something about his facial expression reminded me of a shark.

“Would you say you’re confident in the role?”

I felt like I was being pushed out onto thin ice. “I’d... I’d like to think so, yes, sir.”

The Chief Inspector erupted, going from 0 to 100 in a heartbeat. The mask fell, his face suddenly contorted in fury. His eyes blazed and the muscles in his neck and forearms stood taut. He bellowed at me, using both language and volume I considered extraordinarily unreasonable.

“Then what the *hell* is this all about then?” He threw a sheet of paper at me, and I jumped, startled. I picked it up and quickly scanned it, hoping to find a clue to help me understand the pickle I was obviously in. It was the incident report from the domestic incident I had attended last week—the couple with the passport.

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

His voice became even louder. “There, son. The theft. THE ASSAULT. Crimes were reported.”

He snatched the paperwork back, jabbing his finger at the text showing my mark off. “HE HAD THE PASSPORT ON HIM. WHY DIDN’T YOU DETECT THE CRIME?”

I had no idea what to say. I was well aware that the Home Office counting rules only permitted the recording of a criminal offence when the circumstances of the victim’s report amounted to a crime, and there was no credible evidence to the contrary. Upon our attendance, the circumstances of the victim’s report had altered, and credible evidence to the contrary had duly been discovered. Reverting back to the analogy of senior officers moving the goalposts, it seemed that once again, I had done what was expected of me in the situation, but my actions were now being considered, in a different light, as wrong.

I tried explaining this to the Chief Inspector, who shouted even louder. “He assaulted her and had her passport. GET BACK OUT THERE AND ARREST HIM. DETECT THE CRIME.”

This really knocked me for six. When newly recruited police officers undertake their basic training, they have a core number of things drilled into them. One of them is that when arresting someone, it must *always* be to the satisfaction of the arresting officer that the arrest is lawful.* Ergo, you cannot simply be ‘ordered’ to arrest someone by a third party, a fact robustly drilled into all recruits during their initial training.

However, this is exactly what was now occurring. The Chief Inspector, wrongly believing that his position of authority gave him untold power over everyone around him, was ordering me to go out and arrest the husband who, in all likelihood, had committed no crime. What made things even worse is that, in heaping on the pressure, the Chief Inspector was under the (completely incorrect) belief that if a suspect was interviewed outside of a police station, they were *not* entitled to legal representation. It would never have been acceptable for a PC to argue with a Chief Inspector, and might even have resulted in an accusation of ‘insubordination’.

* For an arrest to be lawful, two elements are required, both outlined in section 24 of PACE. Firstly, the arresting officer must suspect a person’s involvement or attempted involvement in committing a criminal offence, and have ‘reasonable, objective grounds’ for this belief. Secondly, the arrest must be necessary for one of a clearly defined set of reasons, which broadly cover identifying that person, preventing damage or injury, or to allow prompt and effective investigation.

Being a responsible citizen, the husband would never admit the theft, meaning the entire procedure would be a complete waste of time and taxpayer money, and would probably result in me receiving a complaint... unless, of course, the man admitted the theft. However, he was only likely to do so if I exerted undue pressure on him. Having been a police officer for the past twenty years, the Chief Inspector knew precisely the conundrum in which he was placing me, but he didn't care. He wanted to avoid becoming answerable to his *own* commanding officer, the Superintendent, and thus the shit rolled downhill yet again.

It is also important to give consideration to the fact that arresting someone can be a life-changing experience for some people; it can have significant implications and consequences. You are stripping someone of their liberty, they will be photographed, their fingerprints will be taken and stored on a national database before being compared to outstanding crimes, and their DNA will be extracted for analysis and saved. Being arrested may have a fundamental impact on their mental or physical health, triggering anxiety, depression, or worse, maybe even a heart attack or a stroke. It risks negatively impacting upon their relationships with their friends, family, or neighbours. If they have a particular job (referred to as a 'notifiable occupation') then a governing body may be informed about their arrest. Depending on whether they have children, it is possible that Social Services would be notified, and further intervention may occur. Photographs or video footage of their arrest might be shared by witnesses to the act on social media. Sadly, some people have taken their own lives shortly after being arrested. Therefore, there was more at stake here than just statistics and the Chief Inspector's poxy reputation.

As I turned to leave his office, he made a final, offensive little quip. I had found that commanding officers thrive on the power afforded to them by their role, and usually make an explicit point of having the last word. Through gritted teeth, he told me: "You need to reinvigorate your perspective as a professional."

I left the office without saying a word, driving back to my own police station feeling nothing but growing disgust. In an attempt to evidence what had happened, I immediately typed up three sides of A4 in which I detailed the matter, reporting it to my own Sergeant. I still have a copy of that document, part of which reads:

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The Chief Inspector then stated: “This is not about the Home Office Rules or the National Crime Recording Standards”, and stated there was “*prima facie* evidence to show an assault had occurred”. He then shouted: “IT IS A COMMON ASSAULT. PERHAPS YOU SHOULD INTERVIEW HIM AT HOME, UNDER CAUTION. YOU DON’T NEED A SOLICITOR FOR THAT, AND YOU DON’T HAVE TO OFFER HIM ONE”.

Nervous at the prospect of crossing swords with a commanding officer, my Sergeant promptly referred me upwards to our Inspector, The Dark Lord. Although The Dark Lord listened to me (which was honestly far more than I had expected), it was quite evident from the outset of the discussion that he was *not* prepared to offend a benefactor. To my disbelief, he advised me to follow the instructions the Chief Inspector had given.

Refusing to be a party to such potential injustice, I returned to the Sergeant and stubbornly put my foot down. This was not right; the instruction was unlawful and devoid of integrity. I told my Sergeant outright that I would *not* investigate the matter—if the Chief Inspector wanted the man arresting, the Sergeant had better find somebody else to do it. Such was the strength of the Sergeant’s fear that it took him less than two minutes to find such a patsy. I never knew what the outcome of the situation was, although I have thought about it often.

Going back to the report published by the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, it was noted that:

“...the importance attached to crude detection rates were leading officers to concentrate on ‘low-hanging fruit’, focusing unduly on offences that were easier to clear up. [...] Data integrity in any organisation is at risk of being compromised if the people responsible for generating data are subject to performance appraisal and political pressure based on the trends shown by that data.”

The government had finally hit the nail on the head, only it was four years too late. How many crimes had been batted off by then?

I sometimes regret not being strong enough to argue back against the Chief Inspector—in some ways, I was as complicit as those around me, and I was as weak as those I now criticise. In my defence, it was bred into every individual police officer from the outset of their career that authority was to be equally respected and feared, but in many ways, this resulted in nothing but confusion.

Whatever happened to the couple, I hope they both found happiness. As for PC Patrick, the Metropolitan Police officer who successfully blew the whistle on police manipulation of crime statistics, he resigned in 2014 after serving only ten years of his 30-year career. His reward for bringing this crucial evidence to the public eye was spending the final two years of his service under investigation by the Metropolitan Police's Internal Investigations Unit for alleged 'misconduct'. Upon resigning, he cited suffering "bullying and intimidation" over a long period, which negatively affected his physical and mental wellbeing. The Home Office Public Administration Select Committee's report concluded with a series of recommendations, the final one being:

"We recommend that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary should investigate the Metropolitan Police Service in respect of the treatment of PC Patrick [...] We have grave doubts that the Metropolitan Police Service has treated PC Patrick fairly or with respect and care."

What about the Chief Inspector in my own force? He happily retired on a full police pension in 2017, promptly taking up another full-time managerial job in customer service for a private company.

“I have disregarded the order served upon me not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience.”

Mahatma Gandhi

21

MY MOST SHOCKING experience of the force's unethical manipulation of crime statistics came during an investigation of mine which, in many ways, proved that the police service had not been reformed at all; it was still the same, lazy, selfish brute it always had been. Late one Saturday morning, two adult sisters walked into the reception area of the police station where I was based. With nervous trepidation, they explained that they wished to report historic sexual assaults. The offender? Their stepfather.

This was not an everyday, run-of-the-mill incident. It required an officer who would not bat it off, who could demonstrate the best in victim service, who would be prepared for the long—and emotional—haul. I had a very good relationship with the civilian reception staff, who knew much about my way of working. As I sat upstairs trying to piece together a map for something else I was investigating, the desk phone rang. One of my colleagues answered, briefly explained the situation to me, and I agreed to pop down.

Whenever I attended incidents being reported at reception, I would end up thinking back to my own experiences as a victim. I remembered being robbed at knifepoint when I was 17. I was walking home from work, and after being forced to hand over the meagre £2.20 in my pocket, I had no money for the train home, or to even use a telephone box to call my family. I spotted a police officer on patrol nearby, who just laughed and told me I should have 'knocked [the offender] out'. He walked away and never took any details. I also recalled the time I reported being burned with a cigarette by the female student a few years later, and the visible disinterest of the officer at the station, who made me feel as though I was intruding and wasting his time. As awful as these encounters had been, I would become thankful for them, as they gave me the perfect guide for how *not* to behave. No matter how busy or stressed I was, I worked tirelessly to do the exact opposite in every situation I faced.

I dutifully made my way down the corridor to the reception, switching into professional mode as I went. I adjusted my collar and tie, and on the way, I stopped in at the interview room. I made sure the light was on, the desk was tidy, the bin empty, and most importantly, that the relevant paperwork and forms were all ready for use. They used to drill a saying into officers at the training centre: *Proper preparation and planning prevents piss-poor performance.*

I greeted the two women, introducing myself and inviting them in. I escorted them to the interview room, reminding them that any discussions we held would be fully confidential. I offered them a hot drink—I knew this was going to be difficult for them, and I wanted to ease their pain as much as possible.

The story they told was nothing short of horrific. I had never dealt with a child abuse case before, and as each encouraged the other to speak, the tears welling up in their eyes, I could see a transformation occurring. It was as though they had reverted to being children once again—I could see the bewilderment and confusion in their expressions, the fear and pain in their eyes. A few months ago, I had expanded my wealth of interests to include analysis of body language, having recently read a number of books on the topic. As the women recalled details of their assaults, I observed them squirm, becoming physically smaller as though they hoped to become invisible. It was agonising to sit there, watching them relive their abuse at the hands of someone who should have been protecting them. Their story was the stuff of nightmares.

After taking detailed notes of their account, I gave them a crime number, a victim contact card, and promised I would be in touch. Having little experience in dealing with such a serious investigation, I promptly went to seek advice. It seemed instinctive to me that historic child sexual assaults would be a specialist matter, likely requiring video interviews, tentative enquiries with family members, the obtaining of data from times long past, liaison with Social Services, and so on. My Sergeant suggested that I speak with the Child Abuse Investigation team. Upon doing so, I was mortified to be turned away in less than two minutes.

“Sorry mate, that’s not within our remit.” I was stunned and it must have shown, but no matter how much he tried, the Detective Sergeant could not convince me that, simply because it had happened

“years ago”, this form of child abuse fell outside of their departmental scope. By the very nature of the passage of time itself, surely every allegation of child abuse was historic, in a way.

Disgruntled, I walked down the corridor to speak with CID. In early mornings their office was usually empty; they all piled out to a local café to enjoy a cooked breakfast at their leisure. I did, however, speak with the Detective Inspector, who—like the DS from the Child Abuse Investigation team—assured me he would normally be pleased to offer their help, only “We haven’t got the capacity at the minute.”

I would soon find out just how quickly CID could miraculously develop the capacity when it would be to their benefit. In the meantime, I wasn’t sure where else to turn. The sisters had clearly taken an enormous step in coming forward to report the awful incidents which they had tried, over the years, to bury somewhere deep down. It was nothing short of a travesty and an injustice that, after being brave enough to share these horrific memories, every accredited investigator and specialist was, by proxy, essentially smiling, thanking them for their time, and quietly closing the door. I couldn’t believe some of the buzzwords I was hearing. *Remit. Capacity.* This was supposed to be the ‘new’ police service—the police can’t just say no. But they were doing.

So, with no other choice, I made a pledge to myself that I would deal with it; I would investigate it. The prospect was daunting, but I reassured myself that, with my knowledge and capabilities, I could do it. I could, and *would*, help them, and in any event, for their sakes it was probably a case better handled by just one officer with a desire to bring them justice and resolution, rather than an entire team of officers without. There were, however, obvious limitations—the first being that I was not trained to conduct video interviews. Unable to secure any help from anyone, it took me over two weeks to take the written witness statements, which were constructed piece by piece. The main one was almost 60 pages long. The second issue was that we were still not permitted to access the internet, which made any kind of research pretty much impossible.

In my spare time, I began spending significant periods wondering about the psychological makeup of child sex offenders, as to my knowledge, I had never met one. What *makes* a paedophile? Was it

nature or nurture? Was it, as some people claimed, an inherent, uncontrollable desire to have relationships with children? Or did it stem from prior exposure or learned behaviours? With nobody else to ask, I turned to my old friends, books. I read the *Crime Classification Manual*, a dense text by ex-FBI agents John Douglas and Robert Ressler, who would become the inspiration for the hit Netflix series *Mindhunter* many years later.

I realised that, ultimately, it did not matter whether the suspect's behaviour was biological programming or opportunistic depravity—nobody suddenly wakes up one day and decides they are attracted to children. There must have been more victims, there just *had* to be. I began to delve into the suspect's life, research his prior relationships. I visited the childhood home of the two victims, which had been long sold on. By some luck, the new occupants had taken photographs prior to decorating and renovating. I was presented with haunting colour photographs of the children's bedrooms, the very places where the abuse had first started. I spoke to neighbours, friends, other parents. I cast my net far and wide, eventually catching something significant. I located one woman who, at the time of the offences taking place, had been a teenaged babysitter. One evening, after caring for the two sisters, the suspect had driven her home, attempting to fondle her on the way and offering her money for nude photographs.

With some reluctance, the ex-babysitter gave me details of another girl who had experienced something similar. I came to discover that the suspect used to own a computer shop, and would hang around in the doorway when the local children passed by, heading to and from school. He would make pleasant small talk with the girls, presenting himself as a friendly face in the community. He became known as a reliable source of cigarettes and alcohol.

My enquiries with friends led me to receiving disclosures about a birthday party which had been thrown for a friend of the family. In a calculated and predatory move, the suspect had left bottles of alcohol in easy-to-access locations, before leaving the girls to their own devices. When he returned, one girl reported feeling sick, and so, in a display of care and compassion, he guided her upstairs to lie down, where he began unbuttoning and removing her jeans.

My list of victims grew longer and longer. Each person that disclosed an offence required a crime number, and I began to keep a

spreadsheet so I could keep track. By the time I had tracked down more than twenty victims, my head was spinning.

One afternoon, the station's Inspector—a hulking man nicknamed *Big Ben*—approached me, slapping me on the back as I contemplated my next course of action. “Come on, let’s go for a drive.”

Based on my experiences with senior officers to date, his invitation sounded ominous. Alas, subordinate staff never have any choice in such matters, and so we made our way to the car park, where—to my surprise—the Inspector clambered into the driver’s seat of a police vehicle. I slipped into the passenger seat, and we drove for a short distance, pulling up at the side of a long road. He turned the engine off and looked over at me.

“You’re doing too much.”

“Sorry, sir? I don’t understand.”

“That child abuse case. You’re investigating too much.”

The dreaded, familiar feelings quickly returned. What he said wasn’t making any sense—is this not what the police *did*? Was this not how the criminal justice system worked? He saw me frowning and told me straight.

“You’re generating too many crime numbers. Our statistics are going through the roof. Stop recording crimes and deal with what you’ve got—you’ve already got enough to put him away, so use that. Just stop the digging, I know you’re a good investigator, but it’s not necessary.”

Stop recording. Stop digging. Not necessary. The words rang in my head. Was there no way that the Home Office counting rules made distinctions between current and historic crimes? The area had obviously seen a spike in the number of reported sexual offences, which must have caused consternation among the councillors and local MP. It was the county’s most desirable area to live, and the spike risked causing both political and financial problems.

Seeing the way my last refusal to cooperate had turned out, it was with regret that I decided to do what I had been told.

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

Theodore Roosevelt

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THE SUSPECT'S ARREST went ahead as planned, and by some miracle, CID suddenly developed the capacity to offer their support, extending the hand of friendship in the final stages of my investigation. As was somewhat typical of me, I didn't see the ulterior motive or their hidden agenda. I had no interest in job politics, which meant I often failed to recognise insidiousness among colleagues.

On the way to the custody suite, I sat in silence, listening to the casual flow of conversation between the suspect and the CID officer. The suspect began complaining, and I was shocked to hear him make a brazen reference to "n***ers" who had moved into the local area. What seemed worse was that the CID officer, perhaps under the pretence of keeping up appearances and maintaining the relationship, engaged in the conversation. Did the suspect have some kind of preconception that the police were institutionally racist? Had he tried to curry favour by openly using the term? I didn't, and still don't, know.

As most people could have predicted, the suspect was found to have an enormous cache of child pornography. This was discovered when an unlabelled videotape was inserted into his VCR. It showed him having taken two children to a cheap hotel, where he had filmed them abusing each other, before matters progressed further. I left the room—I could not stomach any more. Numerous other videotapes were seized, alongside computer hard drives containing thousands of images. Each photograph and video required cataloguing and grading according to a government scale; I had done enough, and it was a process I flatly refused to be a part of.

CID considered it to be of paramount importance to identify the hotel in the videotape, and, upon finding it was in a different country, two CID officers were promptly packed off on a short, paid vacation to visit the scene. For precisely what reason, given the years that had passed, I had no idea; the suspect was visible on the footage, thus the furnishings of the room held little interest. Given their excitement, I suspected the trip would be an excuse for a drinking session.

CID's ulterior motive for 'lending a hand' finally became clear when I arrived for work the following morning to find all twenty crime numbers I had recorded in relation to the investigation had vanished from my computer screen. Down the corridor, the CID officers were openly gloating about the raft of crimes they had just 'inherited' for detection. Their monthly statistics would be figuratively glowing, temporarily raising the profile of their small suburban office throughout the force. Meanwhile, after many months of solo, painstaking efforts, I was not party to the celebrations. Everything had been taken out of my hands at the last hurdle; they hadn't left me with a single crime to 'detect', and the only recognition I would receive for my efforts would be a single-page entry from my Sergeant, to be lodged in my development folder. This read:

"The enquiry, although at first may have appeared quite straightforward, has—due to the endeavours of PC Linleigh—uncovered a sickening catalogue of child abuse, where the victims have been abused to such a degree, with such a sophisticated element of grooming, that their perception of what was right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, has been corrupted completely. The acts of this individual will have, and have had, long-lasting consequences on the lives of the victims. The tenacious manner in which PC Linleigh pursued this matter started a ball rolling which has had tremendous impact upon the lives of the victims involved."

Started the balling rolling: yes, but only out of necessity when everybody else refused. And roll it did, my 'expert' colleagues simply waiting at the bottom of the hill to catch it. The suspect was charged and sentenced to over a decade in prison where, I'm sorry to say, he continued in his efforts to contact and befriend single mothers.

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Figure 5: Younger-in-service officers were always busy...



Figure 6: ...as can be seen from this drug dealer bust...



Figure 7: ...unlike the older officers, carrying out “urgent enquiries”...

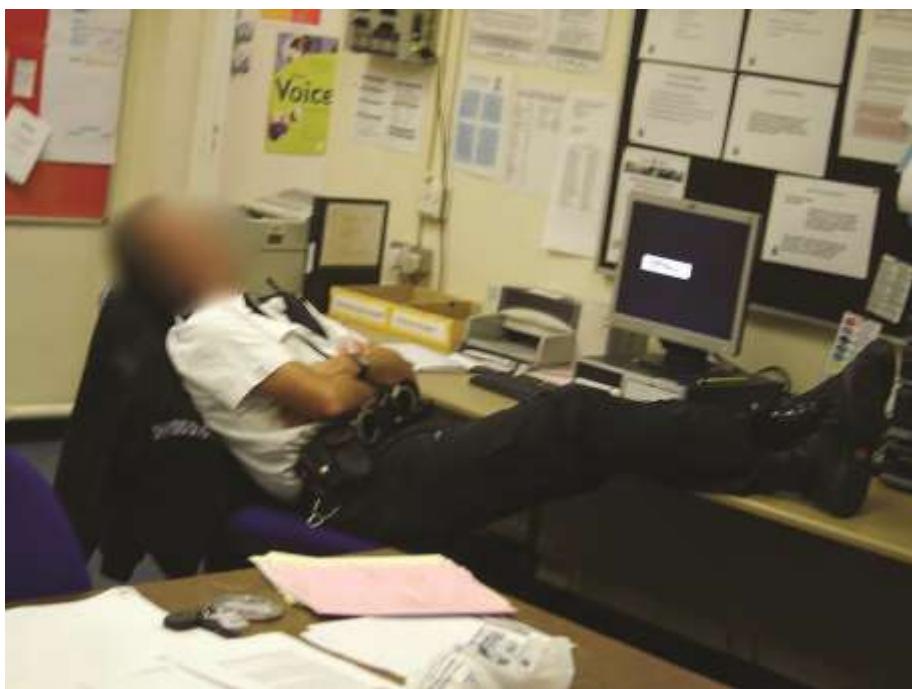


Figure 8: ...at the far ends of the county. In case you’re wondering, it was 2am when I took this—the light sensors activated when I walked in.

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IN THE END, as much as I loved working there, I grew tired of my police station. Due to it being located in an affluent and desirable suburb, officers rarely suffered abuse or physical violence. As a result, our station frequently received officers transferring from elsewhere in the county, usually because they were desperate to move away from the more unpleasant neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, there seemed a common denominator in that the officers we received were usually soft, flaky individuals who habitually avoided any kind of confrontation. They were typically prone to problems with stress or sickness, and on Friday or Saturday night shifts, they would find excuses to bury themselves in paperwork while everyone else attended pub fights, domestic assaults, and dealt with roaming gangs of teenagers wreaking havoc. Consequently, the more of their ilk we received, the fewer of us there were to watch each other's backs. The transferring officers had been given their cake and, now they had it, they were damn well going to eat it too.

The tipping point for me was the departure of our much-loved Sergeant, who had been promoted to an Inspector's position elsewhere. He was replaced with two younger Sergeants, both of whom were mothers, and who each worked part-time to share the single supervisory role. The approved job-share setup was almost comical in its absurdity. The pair worked alternating shifts, and routinely dedicated an hour at the start of each shift to reading the email 'handover' from their counterpart, which had been sent at the end of the previous day. A further hour was then dedicated at the end of the shift to their sending of a similar 'handover', which would likewise take another hour to be digested the following morning. This went on *ad infinitum*.

In the periods between handovers, each Sergeant would excuse themselves from interactions as much as possible, explaining that they needed to 'catch up with emails' or do overdue training. Any requests for support or input were often palmed off between them—for

example, I frequently found myself seeking advice from Sergeant One, only to find she fobbed me off by asking me to wait until I saw Sergeant Two the following day. The next morning, Sergeant Two would arrive for duty, and in-between excuses, she would try to fob me back off to Sergeant One, suggesting *she* was more experienced and thus more able to answer my query. When they weren't excusing themselves from duty, they could often be found hunched over their lunchboxes. They were both poor investigators, poor supervisors, and poor administrators to boot.

Some of the older officers realised the ease with which they could manipulate the duo, either by sweet-talking them into being given preferential treatment, or bamboozling them by giving grossly exaggerated details about minor enquiries they needed to conduct, which were almost always (conveniently) situated many miles away, often on the county border. The Sergeants, preferring to avoid any form of conflict, never challenged the validity of these claims. So, when the radio dispatcher inevitably requested any available officer to attend an incoming 999 call, the older officers would simply report that they were too far away, suggesting it became a health and safety risk for them to travel over such a great distance on blue lights. Then came the salt in the proverbial wound—they would recommend that someone closer be dispatched, and this was typically me or one of the other, younger-in-service colleagues. It was an infuriating time, which I am sure did a lot of harm to my blood pressure and general stress levels. It's important to note here that, unlike other police forces, mine left the investigation of each crime to the officer who initially responded to it. Therefore, the knock-on effect of this behaviour was that I (and others) gradually acquired more and more crimes to investigate, but had less and less time in which to investigate them, as we continued being pushed to respond to incidents our older colleagues dodged.

From this point on, I became prone to vocal eruptions, as I routinely ended up investigating upwards of twenty different crimes, all of which required weekly victim updates, statements taking, arrests making, interviews securing, evidence processing and so on, all whilst still being expected to turn out for almost every incoming 999 call during the shift. I found myself devoid of meal breaks and leaving work late on an almost daily basis. My number of ongoing investigations (and therefore my performance obligations) continued to climb until I

completely lost track of what I was supposed to be doing and when. At the worst point, I was juggling thirty-four active criminal investigations, including a serious fraud valued at just under £1,000,000, residential burglaries, serious assaults, and cases of suspected possession with intent to supply. I was unable to cope and became utterly miserable, both inside work and out.

Meanwhile, some of the older officers were working with fewer than ten active investigations, but, by some coincidence, were always too busy to take on any new cases. On occasion, I would contrive a reason to drive to some of the far-flung police stations to find out what ‘urgent enquiries’ they were conducting, only to creep in and find them fast asleep. The job-sharing Sergeant duo were, as expected, of little help, shying away from both me and any welfare obligations as I began to have periodic meltdowns about doing the lion’s share of the work.

I now understand that I was suffering from ‘burnout’, a work-related syndrome characterised by exhaustion, mental distancing, and increased feelings of negativity, which usually stems from the mismanagement of workplace stressors. Nobody was helping me, and so I had to help myself. Fed up, I lodged a transfer request to move to a different division, hoping that, away from The Dark Lord and the ridiculous supervisory setup, I would be able to secure better development opportunities for myself. The thirty-four investigations could go to somebody else for all I cared—yes, it was unfair on the victims, but that became an organisational problem. I was trying my best to survive, and it was also unfair on me.

Little did I know, I was leaving something bad and heading towards something far worse.

“We feel free when we escape—even if it be
but from the frying pan to the fire.”

Eric Hoffer
The Passionate State of Mind

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MY TRANSFER REQUEST was approved, and I was moved to a much busier division. Thankfully, I quickly found I had more in common with my new colleagues, who were far less used to having the ability to pick and choose the jobs they attended. Consequently, they were a pleasant, happy-go-lucky bunch, who didn't complain about having to take the rough with the smooth. Every day simply was what it was; no more and no less. I got on marvellously with all of my new colleagues, a small group of whom enjoyed fishing and shooting.

I was pleased to find myself being invited along to join in some of these activities, which I suppose classified as a kind of 'sport'. I had never tried trout fishing and surprised myself: I wasn't too bad at it. I doubted there was as much science behind the many colours and lengths of the lures as my colleagues suggested, but regardless, spending a day on a boat in the middle of a vast expanse of water, with nothing for company except good humour and bottles of beer, was peaceful and serene. Like always, my autism meant I threw myself in with great enthusiasm, and even though I only joined them on a handful of occasions, I spent a considerable amount on fishing gear, as well as suitable boots, clothing, and hats.

On other occasions, the crew would go air rifle shooting. They had permission to shoot rabbits on a private sporting field and would sometimes spend an hour or two in a late evening taking pot-shots at the nervous, silvery creatures as they ambled around chewing on the grass. I owned an old Weihrauch .177, and—desperate to join in, to prove I could belong—trawled some second-hand shooting forums to see what else was out there. I ended up buying another .177 and a .22, which the guys, having a much better knowledge of the internal mechanics, were happy to oil and service for me.

The entire team was really close-knit, and for the first time since I joined the police, I actually felt valued, as though I were part of a family. I got on the best, however, with an incredibly tenacious chap named Chris Sherwood. We shared the same sense of humour, an

enthusiasm for proactive patrol, and detailed knowledge of the law; we worked on a very similar wavelength.

I remember one investigation Chris inherited from the night shift—three local gang members had been involved in a street scuffle. The police were called, and the hapless trio took cover inside a local takeaway, quickly realising they were trapped when the blue lights showed up. They were promptly arrested, and all three had significant quantities of money and drugs on them. Their homes were searched, more drugs were found, along with dealer equipment (self-seal bags, scales) and weapons. Each had given ‘no comment’ interviews before being bailed pending further investigation.

One afternoon, I was assisting Chris with some of the necessary enquiries when we received a mysterious phone call from a Detective Inspector... He simply ordered us to drop the case. Not quite believing who he was, I explained that the law doesn’t work that way—an officer can’t just ‘drop’ a case, because suddenly you’re violating pretty much every code of conduct and ethics in existence. In response, the DI became pushy, explaining that one of the suspects was a police informant. Of course, we had absolutely no way of verifying that information—the suspect could have been his distant relative for all we knew. So, we naturally argued the toss, which we ultimately lost; the case was dropped. The suspect was back on the streets dealing drugs in less than a week.

Unfortunately, as was becoming increasingly common with everything else in my life, the good times didn’t last long. Six months after I transferred onto the team, our larger shift was effectively split into two smaller ones. Chris and I, being on the smaller team, inherited a Sergeant who, I am convinced, suffered from bi-polar disorder, or from another condition which was similar in presentation. At the time, I was hurt by many of his behaviours, but looking back now through the lens of my own experiences, if he did indeed suffer with something, I didn’t recognise or understand it. I was too quick to assume he was being deliberately malicious, rather than considering the alternative—that perhaps instead he desperately needed some support that he wasn’t receiving. Recognising poor mental health is something the police service has never been good at.

For a period of several weeks, our new Sergeant would be jovial, laughing and joking with us, supporting us in everything that we did.

When we were knee-deep in paperwork, he would bring us cups of tea. Unlike many other supervisors I knew, he didn't confine himself to the station. He would not only back us up at jobs, but he would also periodically beat us to them. He led by example. It was an approach I wasn't used to, and it made a welcome change.

However, there would be a sudden point when a Jekyll-and-Hyde shift in his character would occur. Without warning, his smile would disappear, and he would instantly switch to becoming hostile, aggressive, and demanding. Just like his periods of radiant positivity, his bad moods would last for weeks at a time. When he was down, he seemed to find joy in isolating officers, embarrassing them in front of their colleagues while he ruthlessly demanded explanations for the most minor or trivial infractions. During these periods, he wouldn't tolerate officers being inside the station, expecting our mounds of paperwork to be completed in the cramped confines of the police patrol vehicles.

Due to this unpredictable turbulence, morale on our newly downsized team soon began to drop. In the civilian world, unpredictability could at least be managed—it could be swerved around, or contingencies could be made in the eventuality you needed to tackle a situation head-on. Unfortunately, in the police service, you had no such options. There was no weaving around the command structure, no contingencies could ever be made which would satisfy or appease. You were perpetually stuck at a metaphorical 'give way' junction, because no matter when, where, or why, priority was *always* given to those of superior rank, even when they were making decisions which were wrong, badly informed, or outright illegal. There was something toxic which ran through the power structure, and I wasn't sure whether the positions of seniority lured poisonous individuals in the way that moths are attracted to flame, or whether those people began their careers with the best of intentions, slowly becoming affected by an old, creeping poison which already existed and had survived for decades.

When he was on a downer, our new Sergeant could also be difficult outside the station, and members of the public would sometimes find themselves becoming collateral damage. In one instance, Chris and I were called to a home in an extremely well-to-do area, set behind walls and gates. The area had existed as a safe haven for affluent locals for many years. The occupants of the home had gone on holiday, and the neighbours, when checking the house before

settling down for the evening, had discovered a woman sitting in the garden. She appeared well-dressed and was not known to them. When they asked her what she was doing, she had looked at them as though they were crackpots.

“It’s my house,” came her surprising reply.

Naturally, a disagreement ensued. The neighbours could not establish how the woman had entered the grounds—she seemed to have materialised out of thin air. They could only surmise that she had scaled the wall, although her clothes bore no signs of such efforts. They asked her to leave, and she refused. Stumped, they called the police, and fate assigned me to the incident.

When we arrived, I spoke with the neighbours first, carefully observing the woman out the corner of my eye. She was sitting on a bench calmly watching some hefty koi carp glide about in a well-tended pond—she didn’t seem to have a care in the world. The neighbours explained their story to me, and I asked them to check the home for any obvious damage at points of entry, or any actual insecurities. As they began their task, I approached the woman, who smiled and greeted me warmly.

I started with the old favourite—requesting her name and date of birth. If she was up to no good, it was likely she would have had some kind of record on the PNC, whether it was criminal or simply intelligence-related. To my surprise, she had neither—she was a blank slate. Suspicious about her name, I asked the radio operator to check the electoral register. She was not named at the property, but overhearing my conversation, the woman corrected my assumption, explaining that she *owned* the house rather than lived there. Thinking logically, I asked her if she was prepared to voluntarily empty her pockets. She did so, producing a handful of bank cards and general identification. They matched the name she had given.

Next, I asked the operator to check incidents of missing persons. It was a long shot, but perhaps the woman was an escapee from a psychiatric ward or local hospital. While the operator checked, I began to scout around the garden. I was looking for any implements—screwdrivers, blades, wires—the woman might have brought with her. I could find nothing. A few minutes later, the operator confirmed the woman had never been reported missing, and none of the ‘live’ incident reports relating to missing people matched her description.

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Figure 9: A snapshot from a trout fishing session.



Figure 10: My air rifle after a colleague fitted the scope.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER



Figure 11: I enjoyed Aikido outside of work.



Figure 12: Sergeant Gingerbread looked how I felt, most of the time anyway.

As the woman waited calmly, carefully watching us with cat-like eyes, the neighbours returned, confirming they had found absolutely no signs of any damage. Everything remained locked. I ran through the options in my head. There was no physical evidence of an offence either having taken place or being attempted—this ruled out burglary and theft. There was nearly-one-hundred-year-old legislation which related to ‘being found on enclosed premises’, but the law still needed there to be some proof to support a suspicion of an intended unlawful purpose. I considered that her presence could have been a preliminary attempt at squatting, however the woman was not inside the actual building, so this didn’t apply. The matter seemed more akin to the world of mental health, however, section 136 of the Mental Health Act permitted police to detain someone and transfer them to a place of safety only when they were in public to begin with, plus the removal had to be in the interests of either the detainee themselves or other persons.

I spoke privately with Chris, who could offer no further input. Suddenly, I realised I had not tried the most simple solution of all—asking the woman whether she would just leave.

“Do you think now might be a good time to be on your way?”

She looked up at me, and without missing a beat, replied. “No, thank you.”

Shit. With no other options, we had to resort to requesting input from our new Sergeant—after all, that’s what supervisors were for, right? It didn’t take him long to arrive, and I watched him work through all of the same logical steps I had taken not long beforehand. By the time he was done, we’d spent almost an hour at the incident. In the end, he shrugged his shoulders and looked at me.

“Arrest her.”

My mind flicked back a couple of years to my encounter with the irate Chief Inspector, bellowing at me in his office, ordering me to arrest the soon-to-be-ex-husband on suspicion of theft of his wife’s passport, purely for the benefit of his monthly statistics.

“Arrest her for what?”

“Mental capacity.”

The Mental Capacity Act 2005 was still a fairly new law and was not yet integrated into common police practices. In essence, it gave people in positions of power the authority to make decisions on behalf of another, should that person be regarded as incapable of making their

own decisions. Its primary purpose was to assist extremely vulnerable people—those who had been affected by strokes, dementia, brain, or spinal injuries, or who had severe learning difficulties. There was an obvious correlation between a presumed lack of capacity and the ability to communicate. The College of Policing would later suggest that police intervention under the Act was typically most appropriate in situations where officers had been confronted with persons who were attempting or threatening suicide, had been the victim of a serious physical assault, casualties of major incidents, or individuals who were declining medical aid in the event of sustaining life-threatening injuries. The most distinct difference between detention under the Mental Health Act and the Mental Capacity Act was that in the latter, individuals could be detained both in public *and* on private premises.

As frustrating as our current situation was, I was certain the new Act hadn't been passed so that police could physically remove someone from a garden. I considered the further ramifications of following the Sergeant's instructions—the woman would need detaining and taking to a mental health hospital for psychiatric assessment. What on Earth would the doctors think when a handful of police officers arrived with a woman in handcuffs who had been admiring koi carp in someone's pond? It seemed ridiculous, bordering on an abuse of powers. I *had* to voice my opinion somehow.

"So, if we detain her under the Mental Capacity Act, what are we supposed to do with her after that?"

He smiled. "As soon as she's outside on the public highway, de-arrest her, then re-arrest her under section 136."

The plot was now moving from being implausible to downright sackable. Detention under section 136 required a similar purpose, that it was necessary for the detained party to be taken to a place of safety for their own good. The woman might have been awkward, but she had not threatened harm, she did not possess any items which suggested she posed a danger, and she had no criminal history. In policing parlance, this sort of approach was known as the 'Ways and Means Act'—you did what you had to do to get the required result. But it wasn't that straightforward. Unlawful arrest was serious business, for those on the sharp end, at least.

"Sarge, I'm not being funny, but I'm uncomfortable with that."

His smile dropped and he fixed me with his death stare.

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“What do you mean you’re *uncomfortable*? ”

“I just... I just don’t think the law covers us to do that.”

I felt myself beginning to sweat. I didn’t know what to do. Given his temper, this was not a man I wished to say no to, but in the same vein, I knew we had to do something with the woman. We couldn’t just leave her there. But, as ridiculous as it was to consider, what if she *did* own the house? My thoughts were rudely interrupted.

“Piss off back to the station, I’ll sort this out.”

I was never sure exactly *when* my card became marked, but I’m pretty sure this incident did me no favours whatsoever.

25

THE SERGEANT NEVER seemed to look at me the same way again. He had taken umbrage at my perceived lack of a ‘can do’ attitude, being unable (or unwilling) to highlight the distinctions between a positive work ethic and breaking the law. Our encounters became few and far between. He would march about with his black folder tucked under his arm, slamming doors, periodically tutting, or shaking his head at me. Even though I had received his message loud and clear, he continued with his behaviour.

One officer left the shift, transferring to a different division entirely. Of the handful that remained, Chris and I felt particularly targeted by the Sergeant’s frequent hostilities. Chris was a dedicated and quite remarkable police officer, and in my opinion, he was not remotely deserving of the negative attention he too was periodically forced to endure. He submitted a written complaint about the Sergeant’s behaviour, which was essentially ignored.

My own time at the station came to an end when the Sergeant asked me to tidy my docket. All officers had one (sometimes referred to as a ‘pigeonhole’), and as the force had never provided any proper form of document storage, the dockets were just a free-for-all, a dumping ground for paperwork and small bits and pieces relating to ongoing investigations. This would typically include copies of incident and crime reports, witness statements, paper evidence (printouts, receipts), CCTV discs, property seizure paperwork, and any and all other manner of odds and ends—pens, rulers, the occasional misappropriated highlighter, you name it.

Now, an officer being asked to tidy their docket was, in the grand scheme of things, a pretty insignificant request. However, there were two additional factors. The first was that there must have been forty dockets, if not more. All of them were in pretty much the same state, yet mine was the one the Sergeant had homed in on. There was nothing that distinguished it from any of the others around it, which suggested his focus was more about me than the docket. The second was the

continued responsibility for attending incoming 999 calls. You can't just turn down jobs or say 'no' to the radio operator—this was almost unheard of, and would be like a doctor in A&E refusing to attend to a patient who had just been wheeled in with several stab wounds. So, I had spent most of my day zipping from job to job generally chasing my tail, and when I returned to the station, the Sergeant was waiting for me in the parade room.

"I thought I told you to tidy your docket."

Once again, I faced a dangerous predicament. The Sergeant knew full well what he'd said, but chose to dangle a cyanide-laced carrot, tempting me to bite, to *dare* suggest he was mistaken. I was many things, but I wasn't foolish. The other officers were busy keeping their heads down, trying not to draw his attention.

"Sorry Sarge, I've been so busy—I haven't stopped."

He reached in, and with both hands, picked up my whole pile of paperwork, launching it violently across the parade room. It went *everywhere*, white sheets flapping through the air as they scattered far and wide, some of them landing on other officers sitting at desks. They slipped under tables, landed behind cabinets... It was a veritable avalanche, and a gentle rustling could be heard as the smaller, lighter pieces fluttered down like the double-winged samaras of the sycamore trees I used to play with as a child. The Sergeant grunted in grim satisfaction.

"There. Now you'll *have* to tidy it up, won't you?" With that, he stalked out.

I remember one officer based at the station who was radiantly pretty. Unlike most, I had never pursued any form of internal romance, however those that did often spoke of her. She was someone who had been blessed with completely natural beauty, and her dark, soulful eyes had a mesmerising quality about them. She stood nearby, looking at me in complete shock. Her eyebrows were raised, her lips parted slightly, as though she had gone to speak but just discovered her absence of voice. The tableau has stuck in my mind ever since. I felt just as speechless as she looked. A moment later, she spoke.

"Are you OK?" Her arm touched mine in concern.

No... No, I wasn't OK, far from it. I was officially starting my journey on the road out of the police service.

“Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a ‘throw away’ culture which is now spreading. And in this way too, life ends up being thrown away.”

Pope Francis

26

I COULDN'T TOLERATE another situation with the Sergeant, and thinking back to what I should have done with the Oaf, I decided that enough was enough. I was not incited by anger; I was more motivated by sadness, and my frustration at the similarities and parallels of the situations in which I kept finding myself.

I looked back at everything I had done in my job so far, realising I had achieved absolutely nothing—it could barely be called a career. Everything I had asked for had been denied. Every position I applied for had gone to someone who had a prior connection. Everyone with any power seemed to work for their own interests rather than for the greater good. Eventually, I had uprooted myself in search of something better, and had now been rewarded with this—having my work thrown across a parade room in front of a cluster of embarrassed colleagues.

I realised how despondent I had become. I gradually lost interest in life outside the job, spending my rest days at home. I avoided invites to go fishing or shooting, dreading coming back to work. Becoming overwhelmed with feelings of despair and frustration, I visited my GP, accompanied by my then-girlfriend Anna, who provided much-needed moral support. Much to the doctor's obvious bewilderment, I provided a lengthy letter (another autism red flag) in which I documented the problems I was facing at work, and the resulting way I was feeling. My GP endorsed my record with the following comments:

"Police officer, accompanied by partner. 8-page closely typed letter of symptoms. Many months not coping with work pressures. Impacts on all aspects of his life. Feels unsupported. Feelings of failure. Police machismo culture."

There are only limited things any medical professional can do to help or intervene in problems at work. Every organisation has a responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act to conduct risk assessments in order to identify work-related stressors and pressures, and if necessary, provide meaningful intervention and support if employees begin to suffer from stress. However, many companies try

their level best to avoid openly acknowledging that their employees suffer with stress, particularly when it relates to work, as this often signifies the existence of underlying problems which can be lengthy, complicated, and expensive to fix.

As expected, nothing changed at the station. The Sergeant's behaviour continued, and my feelings of anxiety and unease continued to climb—I was never sure when or where the next outburst would occur. A week later, I spoke to my GP again during a follow-up call. This time, they noted the following on my record:

*"Long discussion over drivers at work. His choices are limited.
Discussed coping strategies. Increased anxiety. Unable to relax."*

My choices were very limited indeed. After a discussion with Chris and a review of the force's policies relating to bullying, as well as a review of the Police (Conduct) Regulations, I decided to submit my own complaint to our Inspector. He was a young chap, definitely a ladder-climber, and I hoped that perhaps he would be keen to help, if not just to avoid further problems arising on the shift.

So, at home that evening, I sat down at my laptop and begin to type. The following day, backed by the ever-faithful Chris, I took my written complaint to the station Inspector in which I raised concerns over bullying by our Sergeant. I provided details of his mood swings, the outbursts, the Mental Capacity Act arrest... I even printed incident logs which supported my account. All I asked for was some intervention, nothing more. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, my production of such lengthy reports was a warning sign—both of my autism, and of the potential for me to be seen as a problematic member of staff. In fact, my writing was something I would receive heavy criticism for in the future. Although in my own mind I was just trying my best to communicate professionally, any subordinate member of staff who provided documented, detailed complaints was probably considered to be 'high risk'. Rightly or wrongly, I imagine my supervisors were considering me a bomb waiting to go off. From their own viewpoint of self-preservation, if they slipped up, the chances were high that I would be able to not only evidence their errors, but also provide a detailed narrative surrounding the circumstances. I would discover, far too late, that communication is something that people *don't* value—far from it.

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The Inspector, staring wide-eyed at the thick, stapled report sitting on his desk, promised he would look into it. As I left his office, I heard the Sergeant's desk phone ring—that didn't take very long. I picked up some car keys and decided to slip out of the way for the time being. One of the last things I saw was the Sergeant walking down to the Inspector's office, a knowing smile playing across his lips. I heard the door quietly click shut.

In less than 24 hours, my report would disappear into thin air, never to be seen or spoken of again. As punishment for speaking out, I would be immediately, and quite unceremoniously, transferred to work at a tiny police station located in the middle of one of the most notorious council estates in the city.

That is where I would finally meet my downfall.

“Put two ships in the open sea, without wind or tide, and, at last, they will come together. Throw two planets into space, and they will fall one on the other. Place two enemies in the midst of a crowd, and they will inevitably meet; it is a fatality, a question of time; that is all.”

Jules Verne
A Floating City

27

MY COLLEAGUES AT my new police station, now my third in a decade, eyed me with great suspicion. Unlike the leafy-green, affluent suburb I used to police, this was not the sort of place officers transferred to, it was the place they transferred *away from*, usually at the first opportunity. It was also one of two stations in the entire county regarded as a ‘punishment’ station. Therefore, questions were naturally being asked about my arrival. The station was small, and the risks that came with working there were high. The car park was completely insecure, the external CCTV had been fitted in the dark ages, the lighting was intermittent, and the local residents had a long history of waging war against the police.

It was a fact that the police were far from liked or trusted—they were barely even tolerated, and this was demonstrated from the first moment of my very first tour of duty. I was on patrol at around 08:00, driving past parents taking their children to the local primary school. Having started my career in a much more friendly and tolerant area, I would often slow the police car down to a gentle roll, sometimes flashing the blue lights for the more curious children, giving them a wave and a friendly smile. That morning in the estate, I saw one such child, looking at the blue and yellow patrol car in doe-eyed wonder. Quickly reverting to my established routine, I slowed down and waved, a big smile stretched across my face. The poor little boy raised his hand to wave back, and was instantly clouted by his mother, who shouted at him for waving at the police. It is an attitude that at the time I could not understand, but now empathise with entirely.

Almost every arrest in the estate needed multiple officers and, no matter what happened, things would generally end in a fight. Thus, a suitable tactic had been developed which, in short and sweet terms, was *get in, get out*. It was probably because of the constant, simmering conflict between the residents and the police that most of my colleagues didn’t go out on patrol—at all. Night shifts were their opportunity to hole up in the station watching films on a tablet. If they

ever did decide to venture out, it was typically to drive down to the large petrol station near the motorway, where they would purchase a Costa coffee from an automated machine. None of the officers used the shops in the estate, not even the local supermarket, where hooded youths would ride in on their pushbikes, committing thefts on two wheels to enable a faster getaway. In the defence of the officers on other shifts, they weren't *all* like that... however, it was just my luck that I'd been landed with a bunch of cops who had a work ethic which was the exact opposite of mine.

Despite our contrasts, my colleagues gradually warmed to me. I even spent some time outside work with one nicknamed "Rambo". I'll never forget popping round for a cuppa and finding an actual AK-47 mounted on the living room wall... evidently the nickname was well-earned. The exception to the generally amenable group was one female officer who remained distinctly frosty. I've always been good at spotting patterns, and over time it had become clear to me that many of the people attracted to policing had delusions about their own self-importance. This particular colleague was no different. She openly referred to herself as "The Queen Bitch", and would make it clear (through use of attention-seeking body language and anticipatory facial expressions) that she expected her presence to be acknowledged, should you happen to enter a room where she was located. She would glide about the station with her hands raised slightly, pulling faces of mock disgust if she had to touch something she considered to be unclean. She behaved as though everything, and everyone, was beneath her. She also had a knack of twisting the subject of any conversation around to herself in a spectacularly short time. We developed a silent, mutual dislike of one another, and I avoided patrolling with her, and she with me.

To my surprise, I formed a partial friendship with one of the local Beat Managers, Ben Turner. The Neighbourhood Team was widely regarded as one of two departments within the force where the 'sick, lame, and lazy' were sent—the other was the Internal Investigations Unit up at headquarters. Ben and I shared a mutual interest in martial arts; I was interested in becoming an officer safety trainer and practised Aikido, Ben practised Krav Maga. We often spent time discussing different combat techniques and practices, from Judo to Shaolin Kung Fu. One day, we were chatting about knife crime, and I explained that I habitually carried a small, folding knife when on duty,

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Figure 13: Me in front of Rambo's wall-mounted AK-47.



Figure 14: The police station on the council estate was a delightful place.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER



Figure 15: The staff entrance... spot the bad guy. Oh wait, you can't.

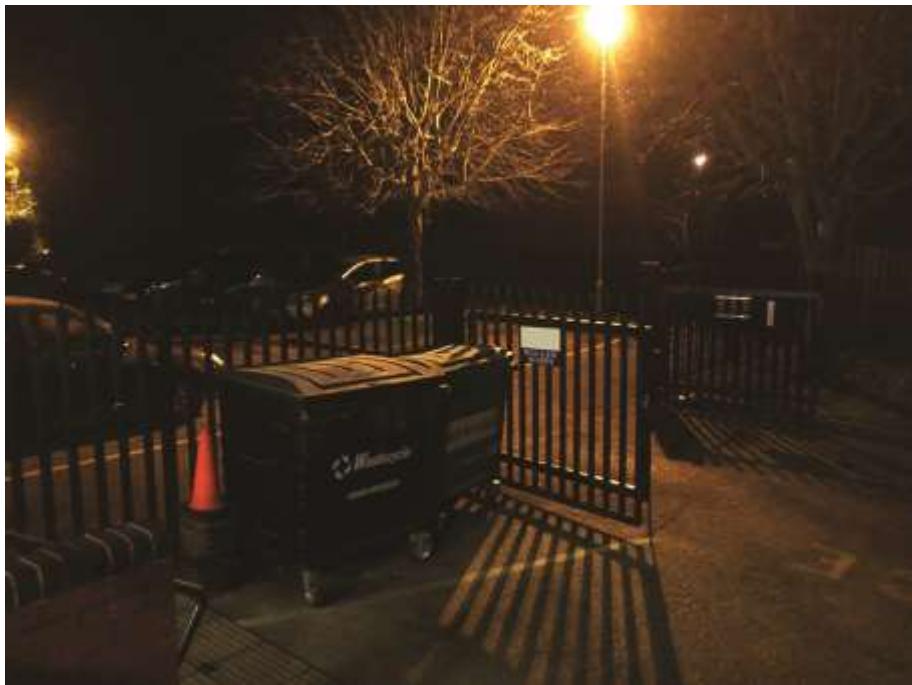


Figure 16: The police accept no responsibility for your vehicle. Or theirs.

following a harrowing incident a few years ago. I was one of three police officers to attend a hanging—the poor man was still alive, and none of us had anything to cut him down with. We searched the kitchen to no avail; his family had confiscated anything remotely sharp, and we ended up trying to hack the rope with a butter knife.* Ben recommended Spyderco knives, with which I was not familiar. He spoke highly of their style and construction, as well as their ability to retain a sharp edge. Ben told me he had a collection of them at home, which, now I was no longer fishing or shooting, gave me yet another area to research in my spare time.

Unfortunately, most of my colleagues were the polar opposite of Ben. I remember being dispatched to a potential domestic at the start of one dark and gloomy night shift. The neighbour had dialled 999 after hearing a woman screaming and the sounds of glass breaking from next door. I travelled down to the location with another member of my shift, a miserable, balding southerner who would later emigrate to New Zealand. It was a dark, cold night, and we knocked at the front door, which was ripped open by a beast of a man, aptly wearing a vest best described as a ‘wife-beater’. Thick gold chains hung around his neck, and his tattoos glistened with sweat.

A gold-capped tooth glinted from behind his lips as he snarled, “Get the fuck off my property.”

Trying to gently build a rapport, I explained that people nearby had been concerned after hearing the noise of breaking glass. I asked the man if everything was alright, and he simply repeated his previous, growling threat, only this time, a little louder.

“Get the fuck off my property.”

I turned around to look at my colleague, the southerner, who was no longer behind me. Alarmed, I spun around—he was nowhere to be seen. A flash of light in the darkness suddenly gave him away. Upon being told to *fuck off*, he had returned to the police car, where I could plainly see him sitting in the driver’s seat, engrossed in a game on his mobile phone. Thankfully, I didn’t have to put up with him for much longer.

* Miraculously, we were able to cut the man down. I performed mouth-to-mouth after his heart stopped, successfully reviving him. I received a ‘thank you’ card from his elderly mother, and although I never saw him again, I hope he found peace.

The primary reward for proactive policing was, and probably always will be, complaints. However, in the estate, people hated the police irrespective of whether they were front-line officers or internal investigators. Accordingly, most tended *not* to make complaints, instead preferring to take the law into their own hands. Sometimes officers would return to their police car to find it had flat tyres or a smashed windscreen (one of my personal experiences). Local PCSOs had their hats snatched directly off their heads, a prized trophy. Colleagues from different shifts were discreetly followed home, their number plates were shared amongst the local hooligans on social media, and on one occasion one of the more brazen criminals even attached a tracking device onto an officer's personal car. Simply put, the better you were at your job, the more your personal life was at stake. Many people in the estate embodied the 'ACAB' mentality. Not that any of this necessarily justified holing up in the police station all night to watch films—there were still good people who lived on the estate, and they weren't receiving any form of meaningful service.

Part of me had begun to give up, and so I decided to throw caution to the wind. I was stuck in a job I was beginning to seriously dislike, working with demotivated and disillusioned people I disliked even more. Unable to coax anyone to come with me, I began to patrol on my own—this was always a precarious move, but it was either that or give up entirely. So, in the dark hours which closely follow midnight, I was prowling around the streets when I spotted a hooded figure scurrying along in the shadows. He had a drawstring bag across his back which looked full—of what I didn't know, but I wished to find out. I pulled up alongside him and tried to speak to him, but he ignored me as though I wasn't there. I accelerated and stopped a little further along the road, getting out to speak to him in person. To my surprise, he promptly told me to "Fuck off," warning that if I didn't, he would kick my head in.

I stopped the car, hopped out, and took hold of his arm, fully intending to subject him to a stop-search, threats or not. However, almost as soon as I touched him, he made a grab for my police radio, trying to detach it from my stab-vest. I'm not entirely sure why he did this, but he panicked when he realised it wouldn't come off. I wrestled him to the floor, pinning his arms behind his back. As I slapped my handcuffs on his wrists, informing him that he was being detained for

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the purposes of a search, I glanced up to see the southerner and The Queen Bitch slowly driving past. They didn't stop, watching curiously as their police car gently idled by.

It turned out that the drawstring bag contained an Xbox 360. If the man *had* stolen it, nobody had yet reported being burgled. However, he insisted that it was his, and he was taking it back home after visiting his friend who lived nearby. I noted the description and serial number before letting him get on his way. Even though we ended up rolling around on the floor, I tried to make a habit out of taking the route of least resistance wherever possible. Although the man had a petty criminal record, arresting him would have gained me very little. Custody Sergeants were notoriously unsympathetic, and the policing world was starting to discourage arrests, preferring handwritten interview notes conducted at the convenience of the suspect instead.

Nobody ever did report the Xbox stolen, so perhaps he just hated the police. ACAB indeed.

“One of the first things taught in introductory statistics textbooks is that correlation is not causation.
It is also one of the first things forgotten.”

Thomas Sowell

28

AS I TRIED my best to adapt to life policing on the council estate, Chris, the colleague and good friend that I had left behind at my previous station, began to experience his own problems.

One afternoon, Chris found himself being summoned to the office of a city-based Chief Inspector. He was promptly accused of racism, a stinging and grossly unfounded accusation which the Chief Inspector attempted to justify by producing Chris's stop-search statistics from the last few months. Using a selective time frame (from which the extracted figures misleadingly suggested Chris had a habit of searching marginally more black, minority, and ethnic suspects than white suspects), the Chief Inspector lambasted Chris for his apparent ignorance. Why? Because he had failed to stop-search suspects in an equally proportionate ethnic ratio... unfortunately, I'm not kidding. Neither of us realised that police officers had to keep a precise and even tally of the races of people we spoke to.

This ludicrous denunciation met the opposition it deserved. Chris, knowing more about the local community demographics than the Chief Inspector did, attempted to point out that his figures were actually very close to being representative of the overall population of the area in which he worked. Unsurprisingly, the Chief Inspector refused to listen. Not to be shown up, he ordered that from then on, Chris was to search *fewer* ethnic minority suspects and *more* white suspects—the instruction was apparently non-negotiable. Presumably every time Chris wanted to search someone who was non-white, he was supposed to find at least one white person to search purely for the sake of maintaining equal statistics, hardly an effective use of his time or theirs. Once again, this approach to modern policing, like many other performance agendas which were periodically pushed by the force, risked pushing officers into the grounds of noble cause corruption.

It therefore seemed that, not being content with manipulating the figures for recorded crimes, the force was now turning its attention to stop-search statistics. Imagine, for one moment, the wider implications

of this instruction for the taxpaying public. First, it is highly doubtful that Chris would have been the only officer to have been accused in such an offensive and inappropriate way. If the subversive doctoring of stop-search data *was* occurring, it was almost guaranteed to be occurring on an industrial scale. Therefore, under the new fear of being publicly branded as racist by their senior commanders (whom they relied upon for promotion and development opportunities), many white officers would begin actively avoiding interactions with those from BAME communities, thereby saving the force from any uncomfortable accusations. It would be easier to turn a blind eye on the street than face the wrath of a worked-up commanding officer.

If the number of searches dropped, the number of recorded crimes was likely to follow suit—even if the statistical decline was small, it would go some way to supporting other performance agendas, such as the overall reduction of crime. In addition, the effects of this increased pressure would (theoretically) last well beyond each period of monitoring... The police service was known for going round in circles. In any event, stop-search was a primary factor in detecting acquisitive crime such as going equipped, theft and burglary. It was also a primary factor in detecting drug-related offences such as possession, and possession with intent to supply. In cities which suffered the effects of increased knife-related crime, records of offences such as possession of bladed articles and offensive weapons would begin to decline. Ultimately, officers were, through the promotion of fear and undue pressure, being groomed to become servile to ill-founded criticism.

Ironically, this was a reality the public had feared. Around a decade earlier, the Home Office published findings from a programme of work on stops and searches.* One of the suggestions was:

“an independent body should be responsible for monitoring and publishing the statistics on stops and searches. People were concerned that the police might manipulate the statistics and/or only publish them when the findings were favourable to the police.”

It seemed that whatever suggestions the government made, the police service always found ways to shortcut or swerve around them entirely.

* Vanessa Stone and Nick Pettigrew (2000), *The Views of the Public on Stops and Searches*, Police Research Series 129 (London: Home Office PRC Unit).

If accusations of racism were to be pointed anywhere, I believed then (and I still believe now) that they should be pointed at the command structure of the police service—the policy makers, the decision makers, and the strategists. Afraid to acknowledge failure, the service was transforming itself into a business, a soulless corporate entity. It was blindingly obvious that the police valued the benefits of superficially improved community relations which arose from the publication of favourable statistics, even if those relations were being manipulated for nothing more than social media spin and were based entirely on sham principles.

Speaking of manipulation, our force had also quietly increased the promotion of staff based largely on their protected characteristics. Many officers with at least a decade of experience began to notice an influx of officers who, through absolutely no fault of their own, were inexperienced and unqualified, yet were suddenly being given prominent and responsible positions. Needless to say, once in those positions, they were not offered the support and guidance which might have helped them to succeed. In short, they were being exploited.

In one instance, I heard a female colleague had been successful in her application to become a firearms officer, a department which had a notoriously difficult selection process, and which was almost exclusively made up of men. The female officer was unable to pass the fitness test, and contrary to the rules which everyone else was governed by, she was given a further attempt. Still unsuccessful, everyone was removed from the fitness suite. The doors were closed to exclude any witnesses, and when they opened again, the officer had miraculously passed with flying colours. The convenience of this circumstance was widely reported between colleagues and caused much anger and resentment, particularly amongst those who had failed but appeared to be of either the ‘wrong’ gender or ethnicity.

For those that doubt this kind of behaviour would occur on a wider basis, I had first-hand experience of it. All officers were required to take an annual fitness assessment, which involved passing a ‘bleep test’, a fairly tough, timed run which required good pacing and stamina. Failure invoked potentially career-altering consequences. One year, I took mine with an eclectic bunch of staff, including two women who expressed concerns about passing. After listening to their worries, the trainer decided to skip the first level entirely, claiming it was “just a

walk”—the entire point being that the ‘walk’ purposefully increased your heart rate and aerobic respiration, thereby making subsequent levels increasingly difficult to complete. When it became evident the two staff were still unable to keep pace, the trainer ignored their struggles, recording passes for everyone at the end as though nothing untoward had occurred... I wondered why we had even bothered.

Elsewhere, my force had been caught red-handed giving out answers to the national application questions at a targeted recruitment event. It was these kinds of incidents which proved the service cared more about what you looked like than whether you were equipped to do the job. One particular officer (who had been successfully recruited through such an event) was eventually dismissed due to his inability to work fluently in English. I couldn’t begin to imagine what that must have felt like, to be led to believe that you were so highly sought-after that you were given the answers on a plate, but a few months later, the same helping hand that previously came to your aid suddenly formed a fist and punched you in the face, before you found yourself being pushed out the door for the same reasons you were pulled in.

Whilst I am always supportive of giving people fair and equitable chances, they must at least meet the basic standards required for the role, or be supported in achieving those standards. To prioritise people or provide them preferential treatment based upon protected characteristics was dangerous—for them, for their colleagues, and for the communities they served.

Internal exploitation of ancestry and heritage for publicity purposes was also common. One male officer who I admired happened to be black British. He had worked as a civilian in the control room for a number of years, eventually deciding to join the ranks. He immediately became a poster-child for the organisation, his face being splashed everywhere. At first, he didn’t mind it, but it was something he gradually came to dislike. Every time news of an emerging campaign was released to the media, the corporate communications department would reach out to him, hoping to snag a photo of him next to a police car he had never driven, or patrolling in an area he had never worked. One day, he complained to me that he was fed up with having his skin colour prioritised over his personality or capability.

I, on the other hand, was just fed up.

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WHILE CHRIS WAS no doubt trying to find more white suspects to search, I was about to have my own experience with the dreaded R-word. At about 08:30 one Monday, I was out on patrol with a colleague named Amelia. We were stuck in a queue of cars, watching early morning commuters slowly emerge from a nearby T-junction, easing their way into the heavy traffic. As we crawled along, I spotted a lone female driver approaching the junction. As she drew level with the 'Give Way' sign, she saw our police car. As we made eye contact, I scrutinised her from afar, noting she was wearing a supermarket worker's uniform. A moment later, the woman slowly began to reverse back the way she had come, disappearing from our view.

This was exactly the kind of aberrant behaviour that, no matter how much you hope and pray, police officers will instinctively notice. On the job, spotting the unusual quickly becomes second nature, and many officers will immediately begin to investigate. I quickly considered the different possible reasons for the woman's impromptu departure. *Maybe she knew a faster route to work. Perhaps she had left something at home.* There were plenty of reasons why someone might suddenly deviate from their planned route, and while doing so was never a surefire indicator of criminal behaviour, in lieu of anything better to do (as they say) it never hurt to evaluate before checking something out a bit more thoroughly.

I mentioned it to Amelia, who had also noticed and considered it an odd move. Considering that the woman had only reversed *after* spotting the police car, I reasoned the chance of something being amiss was greater than it was not. So, I pulled our car around the standing traffic and slipped through the gap into the same junction. Gliding rounding a few corners, we spotted the woman's vehicle further up the street. She was still driving, heading towards a different junction which merged back with the main road, only this junction would have brought her out *behind* our police car, not in front. Now I was suspicious.

I flicked on the roof lights and, obviously expecting to be stopped, she immediately pulled over. We got out, and as I approached, I could see her car was a complete wreck—a fairly generous description, all things considered. One of the brake lights was out, the wing-mirror was loose, the rear wiper was hanging off, part of the door trim was missing, one of the tyres looked close to being bald... and I hadn't even started.

Amelia and I introduced ourselves to the driver and assured her there was nothing to worry about—we were just conducting a routine traffic stop. I requested her driving licence, which bore the name Fatima Ali. I asked the radio operator to check the vehicle's number plate, and I was informed it was registered and insured to Ms Ali and had also passed its annual MOT—worryingly, given the visible condition of the car, only two days ago.

Ms Ali seemed nervous, expressing concerns that she would be late for work. Amelia did a fantastic job of putting her at ease; she had such a radiant, genuine, smile and was naturally gifted in that regard. I enquired about the vehicle's recent MOT, and Ms Ali denied any knowledge of the car being unroadworthy, explaining that she had taken it to a trusted friend's garage. Unfortunately, having family members or friends with shady connections to MOT garages is fairly commonplace, but dodgy pass certificates were a problem for the DVLA. We were more concerned with Ms Ali remaining safe on the roads, and I pointed out several areas of concern, the broken brake light being particularly risky, as it dramatically increased the chances of her being rear-ended. I snapped some photographs on my work phone as I walked around the car.

Something was still bothering me, and I asked the radio operator to check the specifics of the vehicle insurance certificate. A moment later, it all became clear—Ms Ali only held insurance for social, domestic, and pleasure—she was *not* permitted to commute to or from a place of work. She was wearing a supermarket worker's uniform and had already freely disclosed that she was running late for work. Ms Ali's problems began to multiply.

Now, Amelia and I were not the kind of officers who enjoyed persecuting members of the public. Admittedly, many officers did, but I certainly tried my best to remain as fair as circumstances would allow. Unfortunately for Ms Ali, we simply couldn't let her drive away—her

car was about ready for the scrap heap. I could have risked the bald tyre and broken brake light by issuing a vehicle defect rectification scheme (VDRS) notice, but the additional discovery about her invalid insurance meant we had passed the point of no return. I explained our options to Ms Ali, who refuted there being any limitations of her certificate. Amelia double-checked with the radio operator, only to find the answer was the same—no commuting.

Rather than seize the car, we offered Ms Ali the chance to speak with a relative who could collect it on her behalf, providing they held appropriate insurance on their own vehicle. She readily agreed, but to my surprise, she refused to accept a roadside penalty notice. It pained me to report her for summons to court, but she understood the necessity for us to do. Despite the outcome, we parted ways on good terms, and I thanked Ms Ali for being polite and cooperative throughout the interaction. She seemed to find this amusing, but I informed her that, sadly, many people were quite the opposite.

The following afternoon, Amelia and I were called into the Sergeant's office, where we were informed that Ms Ali had lodged a complaint—of racial discrimination, no less. Ms Ali alleged that she had been targeted from the outset, simply because of her race. I was shocked that she had the temerity to make such an accusation, but unfortunately for us, she didn't stop there. Ms Ali also accused me of intimidating her and interfering with a religious icon attached to her rear-view mirror. She reportedly asked me to stop touching it, claiming that I simply laughed in response before breaking the item, showing a "severe disrespect" for her religious beliefs. She claimed to have been scared throughout the duration of the interaction, which she insisted had not been necessary as she was a "law-abiding citizen". Wow. I remember wondering whether Ms Ali should take up a sideline job writing fairytale books.

As Amelia began to angrily explain that nothing of the sort had occurred, I pulled out my work phone, flicking through the images. There, in the background of several photographs, was Ms Ali. She could be seen smiling, arms spread, and in one frame, appeared to be laughing with Amelia. They were hardly the images one would expect had the complainant been scared and intimidated throughout the interaction. Another photo showed a small item attached to the rear-view mirror, evidently unbroken.

The police complaints system was an unfair process, which, contrary to what most people believe, is weighted heavily in favour of the complainant—in part, because there are *very* few times that the public are held accountable for making false allegations. Consequently, lodging a complaint is often seen as a win-win situation. The system can be exploited for financial gain, with complainants falsely alleging damage to property or the incurring of physical or mental injury after a police interaction. It can also be used to divert attention away from wrongdoing, or in some cases, provide plausible excuses for doing so (“I only refused to pull over because the last time I was arrested, the police beat me up”). For those who enjoy playing the long game, it can even be used as a method to prevent police interactions in the future—officers will typically give a wide berth to known complainants. All of these facts considered, it undoubtedly becomes in the interests of those who commit criminal activity or have dubious incentives to consistently lodge complaints and grievances about *every* encounter they have with the police, whether their allegations are based in fact or not. To put all this into perspective, between January 2018 and December 2022, police forces across England and Wales paid out a combined total of £105 million in compensation claims.

It was a combination of many of these reasons which finally motivated the government to introduce body cameras for general police use, to document everyday interactions and ensure accountability. However, in my particular force, even in the event of a complaint being found to be completely fabricated, the *lowest* possible outcome for the officer concerned was (and still is) ‘advice given’. This is a particularly disagreeable and underhand method by which to close any investigation. First, because such advice could theoretically entail the imparting of entirely impractical and nugatory suggestions like “Be mindful of false complaints.” This sort of advice was neither use nor ornament. Second, because even though there was no fault found on the part of the officer (and thus no action taken), both the category of complaint and basics of the allegation remained on the officer’s record. Thus, there is no distinction made between ‘advice given’ following some minor wrongdoing, and ‘advice given’ after a complaint is found to be entirely spurious or even malicious.

This becomes particularly worrisome when, in a *purely* hypothetical example, three complaints alleging assault are incurred

over a four-year period. All are investigated independently, all are found to be false, and all are closed as ‘advice given’. However, this accumulation can still be presented in a particularly inventive manner by any commanding officers who wish to further a personal vendetta, or perhaps exploit matters for career development purposes—neither situation was uncommon. Ergo, even though all three hypothetical complaints were entirely baseless, the ‘advice given’ outcome means that the officer has three complaints of assault on their record. The door is left wide open for speculation that ‘there’s no smoke without fire’. Of course, anyone who has experienced a mechanical malfunction, an electrical overload, or a chemical reaction will argue otherwise.

Many readers will no doubt err on the side of caution, perhaps suggesting that very few complaints are malicious. However, the actual statistics are profoundly concerning. A Home Office report released on 1 June 2022, declared that from April 2020 to April 2021, the UK’s police forces received a combined total of 14,393 formal complaints. Of those, 92% faced no further action—that amounts to 13,242 complaints. There are 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales, which suggests that, on average, each force received 335 complaints per year, of which 308 resulted in no further action being taken. That’s not far off one complaint lodged every single day, but just once a fortnight is one upheld at any level.

So, it therefore stands to reason that almost all police officers will do whatever they can to avoid receiving complaints. Allegations of physical assault were extremely common, and often related to complainants being handcuffed. But what if the complaint related to discrimination, such as racism or sexism? As I had already experienced in my college security job, there were many dangers with such accusations. When made, discrimination complaints were often subjective, usually emotionally charged, and certainly in the case of racism, were almost guaranteed to receive priority attention. Whilst there was a degree of laissez-faire surrounding complaints of assault, there was a particularly negative stigma attached to complaints of discrimination. Even if, after a full investigation, the complaint was declared to be unfounded, the allegation still became a guaranteed stain on an officer’s personnel record. Due to the intangible and highly subjective nature of the topic, any perceived accumulation of complaints relating to discrimination carried a severely heightened risk

of future negative perceptions of the officers concerned, who would find that—even though they had done nothing wrong—they would likely find themselves turned down for career development opportunities. Mud sticks.

Ultimately, the only way for officers to steer clear of discrimination complaints was to avoid encounters with individuals who were either known complainants or had different protected characteristics from the officers. While this might sound far-fetched, it was (and may even still be) more common than you realise. For example, two heavyset male officers might think twice before attending a residential dispute at a women's refuge. A black officer patrolling alone may deliberately avoid stopping to speak with a group of Asian males who are smoking cannabis, because whatever the officer's account of the interaction, it will be outnumbered by those from the group with the larger common denominator. Even when the numerical odds are in the favour of the police, the principle is so damaging it still applies. For example, two white officers could choose to ignore a lone individual suspected to be driving under the influence of drugs simply because he was black; the uncertainty of the offence ("suspected") would undoubtedly make it of secondary importance should the driver later complain that he had been racially profiled.

In summary, the matter of avoiding complaints created a sobering dichotomy—*be racist to prevent racism; be sexist to prevent sexism*. In such a way, the lodging of false or embellished discrimination complaints caused incontrovertible societal harm. It risked diverting police time, resources, and energy away from true victims of racism, sexism, and other forms of unacceptable discrimination, and also pushed officers away from assisting the law-abiding members of minority communities who were reliant on the police for help in tackling important issues which affected their quality of life and overall safety. However, I don't think the police service could define the term 'community' if it tried.

Back to Ms Ali—as body cameras had not been introduced in our force at that particular moment in time, it became a case of our word versus hers. I never discovered what Ms Ali's motive for making the complaint was, but I was incredibly thankful that I had been diligent enough to take several photographs at the scene. Had I not done so, I don't quite know what would have happened. Unfortunately, Amelia

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and I would still be branded with the receipt of a complaint of racial discrimination.

What was the outcome?

Advice given.

What was the advice?

You tell me—nobody ever gave it.

“Don’t let someone else’s opinion of you become your reality.”

Les Brown

30

LATE ONE EVENING in the station, our Inspector appeared. He was a lovely chap—quietly spoken, reassuring, knowledgeable, and I had a lot of time for him. I knew very little of his personal life, but suspected he had a lot of his own problems going on outside work. But, to his credit, he ensured that he never let us down by breaking character, something which I appreciated.

He sat down next to me with a heavy sigh and placing his blue A4 lined notebook on the desk between us. He looked me in the eye, and, saying nothing, patted the book knowingly with his hand. He got up to leave the room.

“Just going to make a cup of tea. Do you want one?” I assumed he wanted me to open the book. I generally tried to avoid making assumptions, but given that I was alone in the room, I figured that if I was wrong, little harm could be done.

“I’d love one, thank you boss.”

I opened the book, finding a central page secured open with a bulldog clip. A printout of an email was slipped between the pages, and I scanned the text. Someone had reported me—well, the term ‘reported’ implies there was some truth to the content; ‘smeared’ me would have been more accurate. All names except for mine had carefully been avoided, but the general content of the report had been forwarded to the Inspector for further investigation... I was stunned. Apparently, I was a ‘martial arts expert’, who utilised non-police issue, martial arts equipment in the execution of my duties. Clearly whoever submitted the report had no idea about Aikido, as the only two traditional weapons were a *bokken* (a wooden training sword) and a *jo* (a four-foot-long wooden staff), neither of which I owned or practised with. Regardless, these items would have looked distinctly out of place on a duty belt, and as it transpired, the only ‘martial arts equipment’ the spineless individual mentioned were tactical gloves—hardly standard kit for the warriors of feudal Japan. I was also reported to

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

have blacked out the details on my epaulettes. The whole thing made me sound like a time-travelling ninja.

The Inspector walked back in, holding two mugs of steaming-hot tea. Despite the frustrations I felt, I smiled, rolling my eyes in (what I hoped was) a comedy effect. I unbuttoned my epaulettes, placing them on the desk in front of him, before sliding my car keys out of my pocket and pushing them over. He shook his head and gestured negatively.

“No, no need.”

“Boss, what the hell is this?” I asked.

He sighed. “Somebody doesn’t like you, it seems.”

Was it The Queen Bitch? The Sergeant from my last station, in an act of revenge for me reporting his bullying? I was confident it wouldn’t have been Ben. Surely it couldn’t be anything to do with The Dark Lord or the Oaf; that seemed too far-fetched to be possible. I didn’t imagine it was the Chief Inspector from the domestic situation involving the passport, although I honestly wouldn’t have put it past him. Our force was a fairly small community, and there was always someone who knew *someone*.

“I’ll sort it out. Just be careful,” the Inspector said, picking up his notebook and leaving the room with a wink.

“Noted, thank you, boss.”

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AS CAREFUL AS I tried to be, I believe everything for me had been destined to end in failure. I had spent my life moving from job to job, never quite fitting in. I now believe this was a combination of my age, my abilities and my neurodivergence—I was always highlighted as being ‘different,’ and it seemed as though this only ever attracted negativity. In the world of civilian employment, I had been spied on, dismissed, and pushed out. As a sworn police officer, I had been assaulted, denied opportunities, lied about, verbally abused, isolated, and threatened. Despite these setbacks, I had persisted, pushing onwards. I had worked hard to come out of my shell, to transform from the quiet introvert I always had been, but it felt like fate repeatedly dropped me into circumstances where it would be made clear my efforts were not appreciated. A terrible combination of destiny and autism seemed to ensure I would never be welcome, no matter where I went, but nor was I willing to throw in the towel.

I appreciate this account sounds full of self-pity, but in my defence, there are other significant factors I won’t mention here. What matters is that I have consistently remained rational, trying to take a step back when considering where the faults may lie. I have always tried to apply logic and reasoning when being analytical. I admit, I was (and am) certainly prone to over-thinking, and would often replay incidents in my head, struggling to find answers, to *understand*. I had become increasingly desperate to fit in, and at some point, my efforts reached a crescendo. Like a parabola with a negative leading coefficient, I passed the vertex and everything began to decline.

One of my last acts as a police officer took place during a clear, cool evening in early 2014. The details of the event and its aftermath are unwieldy, and my story will differ in many respects from the inaccurate, official record. I am not going to spend chapter upon chapter recounting the reasons or evidence for this, I will instead condense it as best I can; this has the added benefit that I have been

able to exclude any information which would compromise the anonymity of anyone involved, aside from myself.

Late one evening, I was on mobile patrol with a new probationary officer, Sahira, and we were driving along the main A-roads which skirted around the council estate. She was pleasant and attentive, and I was talking through the typical observations an officer might make when on patrol. It was a wide-ranging topic, and I spoke about observing people, vehicles, and buildings, looking for signs that might indicate something was amiss or out of place. As we approached a set of red traffic lights on the deserted dual carriageway, we found ourselves waiting behind a shiny, black Ford Mondeo. With nothing else in sight, I spontaneously decided to use the vehicle as a teaching aid, asking Sahira to give me her observations about it. After thinking for a few seconds, she noted that the car was very clean, it appeared to be fairly new, and it had a heavily tinted rear windscreen, meaning we could not see the occupants. There was little else to say.

The traffic lights flicked over to green, and the driver of the Mondeo accelerated harshly, swerving over to continue driving in the right-hand lane. The move was both sudden and unexpected, and given the nature of our discussion, I asked Sahira if she had any further observations. Clearly as puzzled as I was, she mused that the driver might be lost, but the confidence with which they accelerated suggested this was not likely. By pure virtue of the fact that we were intending to return to the police station anyway, we naturally ended up following the vehicle. Eventually, due to the manner in which it was being driven, we decided to conduct a traffic stop. For one of us, this would be a career-ending mistake.

The driver performed an emergency stop, flew into a rage, refused to tell us his name, and got back into his car to drive away. Needless to say, an entirely unwanted scuffle ensued. He made a move to head-buttt me, my CS had no visible effect, and after being unceremoniously thumped three times with my baton, the driver ended up being arrested for obstructing the police and Public Order Act offences.

Other officers, including our Sergeant, The Queen Bitch, and a handful of others arrived at the scene to witness the aftermath. Due to the driver's general behaviour, Sahira and I were requested to conduct an enquiry at the Mondeo's registered address to ascertain who was driving and why.

Our enquiry with the driver's girlfriend a short time later suggested the driver was named Cooper. After my unfortunate experience with Ms Ali, I was acutely aware of how easily complaints could be manufactured—although I considered such concerns to be quite natural, they had been further heightened by the anonymous, false 'report' my Inspector had disclosed. So, in an effort at safeguarding myself from any further lies or accusations, I decided to record the conversation with Cooper's girlfriend on my phone. She explained to us that Cooper was suffering from a medical condition (about which the DVLA required notifying) and, we would later discover, he was not maintaining a proper course of treatment for the same. In his condition, it was highly likely that he was unfit to drive. Furthermore, Cooper's girlfriend confirmed that he had also become aggressive during a similar occasion in the past.

Unfortunately, while Sahira and I were speaking to Cooper's girlfriend, our Sergeant presumably suffered from spontaneous brain failure; acting on a whim, he decided to unlawfully de-arrest Cooper. By the time we discovered this, it was too late. Every piece of potential evidence had vanished into thin air. The Sergeant had not confirmed Cooper's identity, he had not given him any medical assistance, he had not searched the vehicle, he hadn't taken any photographs, we had lost the opportunity to take blood samples, and even worse, the Sergeant had not issued the driver with any bail paperwork. He had simply let the driver (only *suspected* to be Cooper) disappear into the night with his car, whilst still potentially suffering the effects of exposure to CS. In letting Cooper go, the Sergeant had sealed my fate.

I was teetering between being absolutely furious and completely dumbfounded. The Sergeant's decision was probably the worst tactical decision I have ever known anyone make, and it completely ruined our working relationship. He used to be a market trader, and in my state of agitation I considered that he would have provided more benefit to the public if he'd remained selling carrots and bananas under a striped canopy. Had I been the driver (and were I not honest to the point of awkwardness), I would have immediately capitalised upon the golden opportunity which the Sergeant, in his apparent absence of grey matter, had unknowingly presented. I would have gone home, manufactured a story with my girlfriend, given myself some lumps and bruises, and come back waving a hefty claim for damages.

To be honest, that isn't far off what happened.

Sahira and I returned to the station where I expressed my anger and disgust at the Sergeant's actions. In response, he promptly backdated some street bail paperwork and hurriedly dispatched other officers to locate the driver. This was now the second completely unlawful thing the Sergeant had done, but lucky for him, fortune favours the foolish.

To my surprise, the officers located the driver, who they noted was visibly uninjured. They confirmed the driver's identity as Cooper, who (presumably unaware that there was no obligation to) duly accepted the street bail paperwork. Cooper returned on bail as planned, in the company of an experienced defence solicitor. Unsurprisingly, the pair provided a distinctly different version of events to the one Sahira and I had documented in our witness statements. Cooper claimed that any poor driving he had exhibited was *entirely* our fault—he alleged that we were “pursuing” him, “tailgating” and “intimidating” him by using our police vehicle as a weapon. This could be, and would be in due course, proven as demonstrably untrue.

Cooper then claimed that, upon stopping the car, there was no aggression whatsoever from him—he claimed to have been calm, collected, and polite; I found myself being portrayed as the evil villain of the story. In response to his placidity, it was alleged that I spontaneously attacked Cooper, unleashing a torrent of CS spray before lashing out with a flurry of punches. Cooper denied making any efforts at leaving, remarking that he only tried to get back into the Mondeo to escape my blows. Unhappy with this, I reportedly pulled Cooper from his vehicle, raining down more punches, before kicking and stamping on him in full view of passing traffic. Apparently, I then removed my baton and repeatedly struck him in the back, spine, and shoulder blades numerous times.

What was my apparent motivation for all of this?

I was white. Cooper wasn't.

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THE KLAXON HAD been sounded. Although Cooper's confrontational and obstructive behaviour had been witnessed by two serving police officers and a passing paramedic, a disagreement quickly arose with the CPS, who—off the record—expressed reluctance to charge Cooper for fear of inflaming racial tensions and exposing the police service to adverse publicity. I noted, with some dismay, that the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, protests about police brutality and institutional racism had spread across the United States following the murder of 43-year-old African American street vendor Eric Garner by officers of the NYPD. Whilst I, like millions of others, was horrified by the footage of Garner being choked to death on the public sidewalk, I feared the raw emotions and outpouring of community grief would spill over into circumstances which weren't comparable at all.

The disagreement with CPS went back and forth, and we weighed in heavily with details of the significant comments about prior aggression made by Cooper's girlfriend. Furthermore, Cooper was found to have a relevant historic criminal record. Eventually, an agreement was reached to charge Cooper with a Public Order Act offence, however, only a couple of weeks later, the CPS prosecutor dropped the entire case only hours before the court hearing was due to begin. Once again, the CPS cited fear of Cooper making racial allegations against the police service, this time in the public domain, warning that it "doesn't look very good".

My emotions throughout this period were predictably turbulent. To find Cooper guilty, the prosecution needed to prove that it was *beyond reasonable doubt* that the incident occurred as the police alleged, and in my mind, there was ample evidence to disprove the thoroughly dishonest and emotion-laden account Cooper had trotted out in the presence of his solicitor. There were at least two solid witnesses. The Mondeo had a heavily tinted rear windscreen, meaning neither the gender nor ethnicity of the driver could be seen by anyone driving behind. Cooper had not presented any physical evidence of

being punched, kicked, or struck. Finally, the officers, in tracking Cooper down to his destination, noted that he appeared visibly uninjured, one of the most significant inconsistencies in his account.

Overall, the claims being made were nothing short of bombastic figments of his imagination, but because the allegation of racism had now been made, *nobody* wanted to prosecute the case. None of what was happening was fair, none of it was impartial, and even though none of it occurred in the manner being alleged, by dropping the case, legitimacy was being loaned to the idea that Cooper's version of events *could* have happened. In the vacuum left by the absence of common sense, plausibility was hastily being manufactured from fresh air. Upon hearing the case had been abandoned, I quickly realised our credibility would be shattered, and given Cooper's animosity towards me, it was unlikely he would let the matter drop.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the complaint paperwork arrived. It was handed to me by my Sergeant, and skimming over the details, I found, to nobody's surprise, I was being accused of racial discrimination and exerting 'excessive use of force' during Cooper's arrest. Sahira had also been accused of something similar, although I cannot precisely recall what—it seemed she had merely been included by virtue of the fact that she was physically present, rather than anything more substantive. The Sergeant himself, who had unlawfully de-arrested Cooper at the scene (strike one), before allowing Cooper to drive the Mondeo away whilst being ostensibly unfit (strike two), before fraudulently issuing him backdated bail paperwork (strike three), didn't appear to be under investigation at all. Yet again, the shit was rolling downhill, and this time it looked like it would be a landslide.

Sahira tried to offer me comfort, and as much as I appreciated it, her efforts were futile. I told her that I could foresee national newspaper headlines and my unceremonious dismissal. She thought my prediction was wildly pessimistic and told me so. However, my foresight was based firmly in the experiences I had been through to date. I had been unfortunate enough to glimpse the inner workings of police politics. I knew that senior officers had a penchant for saving themselves and would happily let those under their command hang if it meant their own careers would remain secure. In a Titanic-style scenario, they were precisely the type who would barge women and children aside so they could reach the lifeboats first.

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I slowly started to slide into a state of depression; this was also the first time that I began to suffer with what I came to recognise as anxiety, an ailment that has never left me since. I was facing the dark unknown, and every day brought gradually increasing feelings of panic and despair. I knew that, now the reputation of the police force was in jeopardy, my clean record, many letters of thanks, and commendations would mean absolutely nothing.

I remained in contact with the Police Federation, expressing my frustrations and innocence in alternating sequence. I told them I had a covert recording of Cooper's girlfriend, which I hoped might help prove my innocence, but they took little interest, instead continuing to give me their assurances that this was just 'routine,' that the force was just 'going through the motions', that everything would be 'alright'. Knowing well the vindictive nature of the police service, it is sad to say that I had absolutely no reason to believe them.

“Investigating officers suppress, manipulate, and invent evidence according to its relevance to the complainant’s allegation. The investigating officer makes a prejudicial assessment of the evidence.”

Statement from the Police Action Lawyers Group provided to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, 1997

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AFTER WHAT SEEMED like forever, I was eventually invited to a formal interview with IIU staff at the police headquarters. I attended with my Police Federation representative, finding the two investigating officers (one retired officer now working as a civilian investigator, and one Detective Sergeant) to be what I could only describe as professionally hostile in their demeanour. Their conduct was a country mile from the training I had received in investigative interviewing—they were dour, tunnel-visioned, and thoroughly disinterested in my account. It was obvious that neither had worn a uniform or been out on the streets for decades, and it took me minutes to conclude that they already considered me guilty, despite not yet having heard my account.

I started to read a lengthy, pre-prepared statement (they didn't like that at all) which received a variety of bored looks and stifled yawns. I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated as I read my own carefully constructed words, as my entire career was in their hands. I was at the mercy of two slovenly hypocrites, who had no doubt joined the police force in the late 1970s and early 1980s, pre-PACE, back when people could be arrested on no more than 'sus'—in essence, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. My words and enthusiasm had no effect. It seemed that no matter what I did, I simply couldn't rouse any level of interest from either of them.

Once I'd finished reading my statement, I was hit with several Machiavellian questions, which appeared to have been planned in advance to support their skewed hypothesis. As such, it didn't take long for me to clash swords with the DS, an overweight, unattractive woman who wore thick glasses smeared with her own fingerprints. She had absolutely no idea about police training techniques, the relevant terminology, or the use-of-force continuum. These were key topics of discussion that should not only have been researched in advance, but which should have formed the bread and butter of her understanding. As part of my autistic nature, I had taken much interest in the legalities

surrounding police use of force from the moment I joined, having been interested at one point in becoming a trainer. I owned several books on the subject, written by both British and American authors, and took a keen interest in relevant legislation and case law. I had assisted a colleague in delivering some private training to the NHS, and I even found myself being regularly used as a ‘demonstration’ model in force training sessions, as most of the pain compliance techniques didn’t work on me,* much to the frustration of the trainers.

As the interview progressed, the sizable disparity in our knowledge resulted in the Sergeant reacting ever more haughtily—she simply couldn’t wrap her head around why someone would have such an in-depth understanding of policies and procedures. In her mind, this was evidence of a defensive mindset—she assumed, quite wrongly, that upon receipt of the complaint paperwork, I had gone away and done copious amounts of research on the topic shortly before my interview, not considering for one moment that I might simply be capable, or worse, *interested* in the legalities. Consequently, she became snappier and more abrupt as time wore on.

The first major disagreement arose over my witness statement. The actual exchange from the transcript went as follows:

Interviewer: Can I just move on to your statement. Firstly, it’s an arrest statement for Public Order offences and Obstructing a Police Officer and it’s twelve pages long.

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Is that normal for you?

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Is it?

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Twelve pages long. Do you normally go to such great detail?

Me: It’s normal for any incident where I end up non-

* I would later learn that, believe it or not, increased pain tolerance is apparently a good indicator for autism spectrum disorder in adults.

compliant handcuffing, withdrawing CS, pulling people about, you know, whatever it may be. I always justify it, based on suggestions from people in *your* department. I had a job a while back—everyone told me to do a basic statement, and I said no. So, I actually rang your department. I can't remember who I spoke to, it was a Detective Sergeant. The lady said I should always do a full, detailed witness statement and reflect that in a pocket notebook entry. That's what I've always done, I could give you hundreds.

Interviewer: Fine, so if I was to say... Look at every time that you have used force since that phone call, you would be able to give me examples of statements that are this detailed?

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Can I just add—I don't know who gave you that advice. You know, because this reads to me, when I first read it, like a defence thing.

Me: Right.

Interviewer: Your statement. So, we've covered the fact as to why it's so lengthy, then.

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: The fact that that's normal for you.

Me: It's my writing style.

A further point of contention arose around me striking Cooper with my baton. I noted that the Sergeant routinely exchanged preferred police terminology for terms more commonly associated with unlawful actions. *Strike* became *hit*, *hold* became *grab*. In theory this was a minor point, but, in the same way a suspect's visible unease might necessitate probing the topic at hand further, I felt these were not-so-subtle indications of the Detective Sergeant's biased belief of my guilt.

“So why did you *hit* him?”

“My intention was to target the leg, as this was the largest available muscle mass. I had planned for the sudden onset of pain to

cause a physical reaction, so Cooper would sit upright, and I would then use that momentum to extract him from the vehicle.”

She blinked slowly. “So... You were hitting him and expecting him to move towards the source of the pain?”

This oversimplification betrayed not only a deliberate obtuseness, but also twisted events to fit her narrative, failing entirely to engage with the actual process behind use of force. In efforts to exert physical control using pain compliance, the message being sent to the subject was always the same: *Do what you’re told, and the pain will stop.* It obviously had psychological roots in a parent-child or teacher-pupil relationship. The Sergeant had somehow managed to reduce an already-simple concept to a slurry of ignorance which, to my disbelief, she was still struggling to make sense of.

Pulling a sheaf of papers out of a folder, the Sergeant slid some photographs over the table. They appeared to depict a couple of faint bruises, although it wasn’t immediately clear which part of the body had been photographed, as they were in black and white and had no forensic scale. Closer examination suggested that the original printouts, probably the colour ones, had been run through a grayscale photocopier, with the contrast increased to conveniently make the bruises appear darker than they were.

“How do you explain these?”

I was baffled by the simplicity of the question. I hadn’t denied using force, nor had I denied that there had been a scuffle, during which Cooper had been pushed down to the floor before being forcibly handcuffed. If he had sustained one or two minor bruises during the incident, that was unfortunately par for the course. What was quite apparent is that the photographs were most certainly *not* evidence of being beaten to a pulp, being stamped on, or kicked around like a football.

I stuck to my guns because there was nothing else to do; there was no other explanation to give. I did what I had done because it was what the police had taught me to do. That was one of the double-edged swords of autism—you followed instructions rigorously, but in any subsequent retrospective analysis, you became an immovable force. The investigators wanted me to bend, to give way, to admit that I had perhaps been wrong, but to their annoyance, I would do nothing of the sort. Eventually they gave up and terminated the interview. I left

the room feeling a strange mixture of irritability and resentment. After everything I'd gone through, after *every* overtly illegal act I had either been subjected to or witnessed, I was the one being put through the wringer simply because I had done what I was trained to do. The irony of it all was not lost on me.

A week or so later, I received an unexpected call from my Federation representative, who relayed disturbing news about Sahira's interview. He expressed his disgust at the IIU investigators, describing the interview as an "interrogation". He remarked that it had been oppressive to the point that it bordered on browbeating, and that Sahira had been brought to tears as a result. This echoed the report ordered by Sir Paul Condon on the police use of oppressive and coercive interview tactics, which had been published 17 years earlier. One highlighted example mentioned an arson suspect who was "subjected to a continuous onslaught which reduced him to tears." Evidently not much had changed in nearly two decades.

As a result, my rep had lodged a formal complaint about the process. Mulling this over, it appeared that, in their rabid disbelief of my own account, the investigators deliberately targeted Sahira, viewing her as the weakest link. Once again, this revealed the tendency of the police service to resort to any means necessary to achieve whatever result was considered expedient.

I received a further update a few days later. Sahira's interview had been reviewed by a senior officer in the IIU, who had roundly agreed with my Federation rep's complaint. The offending interviewer was promptly issued an improvement plan—something that, given her role and experience, shouldn't have been remotely necessary. In response to receiving this criticism, the Detective threw her toys out of the pram, going off sick with stress. Living her Monday-to-Friday life in the ivory towers of the police headquarters, I doubted the woman knew the first thing about stress. The closest she probably came to an increase in blood pressure was either having to walk up the stairs to her office when the chrome-plated lift was out of service, or finding the headquarters' vending machine had swallowed her money.

My rep continued, telling me that he had also received an off-the-record phone call from one of the interviewing officers, during which he saw fit to disclose the fact I had the covert recording of Cooper's girlfriend. I went absolutely nuclear—I demanded to know why the

hell they were having off-the-record phone calls with one another, and why he'd decided to blab about the recording without my approval. Brushing my questions off, my rep made several attempts at reassuring me, promising me the investigator was a "good guy" who had done some internal decorating for him—they even played golf sometimes. It sounded like the two were just about in bed together. I was absolutely livid and shouted so much that my rep put the phone down on me, before sending me a curt text stating that it was "probably best" if we didn't speak again. He found someone else to represent me in fairly short order, which in the circumstances was something I would have demanded had he not arranged it.

I would later read a report published in 1997, by the government's Select Committee on Home Affairs.* It related to an official inquiry into the internal handling of police misconduct investigations. It was a lengthy and complicated document which, in many places, heaped scorn upon the way police conducted investigations into their own officers. Allegations were rife that favouritism was typically shown towards individuals under investigation, and a scathing statement, issued by a solicitor's firm who participated in the inquiry, read:

"It is the almost universal experience of complainants and their lawyers that the bulk of Investigating Officers are hostile, aggressive, dismissive and biased."

My own experience showed that in the almost two decades that had passed since the inquiry, the police service—my part of it, at least—had turned a full 180 degrees. It was now doing the exact opposite of what it had been accused of. The way in which complaints were often marked off in our force ('advice given') certainly suggested that significant bias was now being shown to the *complainants* instead of the officers, and although the roles had been reversed, the statements published within the Committee's report were still stincingly accurate.

I wondered whether these same parties would continue to express the same level of concern if they knew that such behaviour was still prevalent nearly twenty years later, only now the bias was against the police officers themselves. I doubted it very much.

* Available on Parliament.uk, currently at:
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmhaff/258-i/ha0102.htm>

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EVENTUALLY, I RECEIVED news of the investigation's outcome: I had been cleared. It had been eighteen months since Sahira and I stopped Cooper—the length of the investigation had been absurd, and the process had taken an irreversible toll on my mental health and general wellbeing. The news should have been a cause for celebration, but I felt acid burning somewhere deep inside my gut. I knew I had just emerged from the inner wall of the hurricane; I was in the eye of the storm. I couldn't let myself be deceived by the calm surrounding me.

A Detective Superintendent in the IIU had reviewed the evidence (or more accurately, the lack thereof) and had produced a half-page report summarising his views. The report had not been intended for my eyes, but a copy had been leaked to me by a friend in an advantageous position. The Superintendent observed that Cooper's account was not entirely consistent with the evidence obtained by the investigators—a rather unsurprising revelation. He noted evidence indicating Cooper's aggression and possible abuse towards us, concluding that our actions did *not* constitute an excessive use of force. Additionally, there was no evidence supporting Cooper's claim of racial discrimination as a motive before, during, or after his arrest. Despite this, there was no mention of my covert recording, leaving me uncertain about its significance. Perhaps it was a sleeping dog the IIU preferred to let lie.

The recommendation made (because presumably the investigators had to make at least one) was that I receive an 'action plan' which involved two things: being re-trained in how to extract a suspect from a vehicle, and wearing a body camera when on duty. Given that we had never been properly trained in extracting someone from a vehicle to begin with, along with the fact that police body cameras were still in the pilot phase at the time we stopped Cooper (and had only been rolled out force-wide since), I couldn't decide whether the outcome was satirical or just pathetic. Part of the report which the IIU had refused to release read:

“On balance, I don’t consider [the] allegation upheld. [...] I consider this an issue that would be most appropriately dealt with as a performance issue. This should take the form of an action plan for the officer, prepared and delivered jointly by IIU and Division, with officers of at least the rank of Chief Inspector. The action plan should include appropriate re-training and the use of body-worn video when conducting public-facing duties”.

Evidently the author of the report had a higher opinion than I did of the competence and integrity of those in the higher ranks. I wondered whether my action plan would be compiled by the Chief Inspector who thought interviews outside a police station exempted the interviewee from their right to legal representation, or perhaps by the other Chief Inspector who failed to acknowledge that grounds for conducting stop-searches might consist of something more than demographic categories. Sadly, the IIU’s approach of equating rank with competence missed the mark by a country mile.

The entire concept of the Internal Investigations Unit had always struck me as peculiar. We were being judged by officers who, in all likelihood, hadn’t patrolled the streets in decades, and when they had done, they were probably guilty of far worse offences than the routine matters they ‘investigated’ daily. It seemed inconceivable that our decisions, made in split seconds under pressure or in fear, could be subjectively interpreted and dissected at leisure by people comfortably ensconced behind their desks, enjoying the luxury of Monday-to-Friday workdays. These were individuals who had probably never used the same equipment we had been issued, and more importantly, were unlikely to meet the required fitness standards. The hypocrisy of such personnel labelling themselves as police officers was glaring, but then again, hypocrisy seemed ingrained in the police service.

Notably, absolutely nothing happened to Cooper. The criminal prosecution was not reinstated, and as far as I’m aware, he faced no penalties for making an allegation which, based on the evidence, was (at the very least) dramatically embellished, resulting in a vast waste of time and energy at the taxpayer’s expense. In addition, nothing happened to the Sergeant who unlawfully de-arrested and street-bailed Cooper—he was never asked to account for his actions, and he was never formally investigated. In fact, he was rewarded with a promotion to the rank of Inspector while the investigation was ongoing.

Meanwhile, I felt a sense of relief as I learned I would finally be returning to my normal duties. Yet, this relief was tinged with bitterness, reflecting the one-sided, counter-productive, and psychologically damaging nature of the police service complaints process. I had been falsely accused, subjected to a protracted investigative ordeal, endured an oppressive and unprofessional interview, and watched helplessly as my detailed knowledge was misconstrued as evidence of guilt. Then, when all the digging yielded nothing, the doors simply slammed shut. I had been kicked off the ride, denied any semblance of justice, and told to resume my duties as though none of it had ever occurred. This wasn't just something that happened to me, either; a July 2022 Freedom of Information Request submitted to the Metropolitan Police Service revealed that the *average* duration of a misconduct investigation was a startling 372 days.

Nobody seemed to consider the effect this might, or did, have on me, just as similar investigations would likely have on my colleagues. I was not referred to Occupational Health in any timely fashion, nor was I given any meaningful support. I was just dragged in, pushed into a corner, aggressively accused, and then booted out again. The experience left a foul taste in my mouth, and in quieter moments, I began considering whether to submit my resignation.

As our Sergeant had been promoted (and thus departed from his post during the investigation), it was some coincidence that his position became filled by my next-door neighbour, a young, petite woman called Maya. I remember when she first joined the police service—as a favour, I had found her the home she now lived in. Yet with only a couple of years' service under her belt, Maya quickly found herself being pushed onto the Accelerated Career Development path and was now my supervisory officer.

Maya's attempts at showing empathy for my situation and my feelings of disillusionment and disenchantment belied her confusion. She could not see or understand my position, and how could she? I had been policing for well over a decade and had been denied *every* single opportunity I had asked for. It was not a question of whether I could do the job—I could, and everything I had done to date proved that. I had saved two lives, I had commendations, I was a tutor Constable, I had passed my Sergeant's examination, and I had received more letters and emails of thanks than I knew what to do with, including a couple

directly from the Chief Constable. In contrast, within a couple of years of joining, Maya found her own development opportunities being prioritised without having to lift a finger. She was now on the fast-track scheme to becoming an Inspector. Her experiences could not possibly be compared to mine; she viewed the police service as benevolent, whereas I knew it to be a very different beast.

No matter how hard I tried, I found myself unable to summon the enthusiasm to continue caring about the job. It dawned on me that I wasn't anything extraordinary; there would *always* be crime, and consequently, there would *always* be police officers. As long as the public's most basic expectations were being met, the drive to excel seemed irrelevant. There'll always be someone else to fill your shoes.

I started to withdraw, reducing the amount of time I spent interacting with colleagues. I normally found it difficult to maintain any kind of meaningful friendship, and even though Sahira had felt like a sister to me, we slowly drifted apart. I could not bring myself to conduct traffic stops any more, and fearing further malicious complaints, I began to avoid attending jobs wherever I could. It has taken many years for me to finally understand and admit to myself how truly damaging the whole experience was.

It was only a couple of weeks later that Maya called me into the office. She was holding a piece of paper and asked me to sit down. I knew what was coming before the words left her lips. Cooper had submitted a formal appeal to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (now the IOPC). The complaint had been escalated, as he was now levelling accusations against the police force as a whole, which I was led to believe were allegations about 'covering up racism', protecting racist officers, or similar-sounding rubbish. In a face-saving (and entirely unhelpful) response, the IPCC had recommended that a full-blown, gross misconduct hearing be held in public, chaired by an independent panel.

I felt the blood drain from my face into my carefully polished boots.

To avoid the police force being criticised, I was going to be investigated all over again—only this time, in the public eye.

“I believe, therefore, that a grand game of chess is being played on a level that we can barely imagine, and we are the pawns. Pawns are valuable only under certain circumstances, and are quietly sacrificed to gain an advantage. Anyone who has studied military strategy is familiar with the concept of sacrifice.”

Milton William Cooper
Behold A Pale Horse

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SOMETHING INSIDE ME snapped. I'm not sure what it was, but I had been mentally teetering on the edge for a while. I was already highly strung, and the news of Cooper's appeal pushed me over the edge. Looking back, I suppose that might have been the start of some kind of nervous breakdown. Maya's statement says I refused to sign anything; therefore, I don't think I articulated how upset I was, how utterly powerless I felt—I just started to instinctively shut down.

In my time, I had seen or read the occasional news story about industrial accidents, many of which occurred in countries which had lax health and safety regulations. As a result, workers would sometimes become trapped in machinery and, unable to escape, were pulled into the internal mechanisms to be crushed to death. Such stories were the stuff of nightmares, but I too was being pulled relentlessly into a machine. There was no emergency stop button, there would be no escape for me; it would only be a matter of time. This was not because I had any subconscious feelings of guilt—I just knew how powerless I was.

What made matters worse was the fact I was now being removed from front-line duties. In most cases this was considered a purely administrative move, but it did not make the experience any less insulting or hurtful. The force had been quite content for me to continue my response policing role during the investigation, but now the organisation felt threatened by the IPCC's intervention, measures were quickly being enacted to ensure the force was the one being safeguarded, not me. It was as though I had never been cleared at all. The reasoning for removing me from front-line duties was simple, if not totally unjustifiable: I was not considered 'safe' to interact with the public.

Everything turned into a blur. To enable me to continue my role (in my newly assigned, non-public-facing capacity), I was to be moved, with immediate effect, onto the force's Missing Persons Unit, known as the MPU. This meant *another* station change; I would be starting

under a cloud all over again. My vicissitudes of misfortune meant that no matter how many times I tried to pick myself up, life would always find a way to knock me down. I would not develop an awareness of it until years later, but I began to develop a firmly fatalistic mindset—I had given up hoping; in the grand picture, my life seemed to mean nothing. I had no control whatsoever, I was just a pawn in everybody else's games.

Around this time, I went back to my GP surgery. I can't remember who I saw, or even the conversation we had, but they noted the following on my medical record:

"Severe stress at work. He feels the world and his occupation, the constabulary, are conspiring against him. Feels picked on and bullied. He is facing racism and assault charges over an incident which happened years ago. Suspended from public contact and normal duties. Feels he is being ousted out of his job and career."

As tough as it was, I tried to hold myself together, hiding my internal anguish. I tried to put on a brave face, knuckling down to my new role in the MPU while feigning my trademark enthusiasm. The ongoing investigation against me remained clouded in secrecy, and it was in this knowledge that I went through increasing fluctuations of mood, many times feeling as though my life was entirely bereft of colour—it was as though I were working, living, and feeling only in mute shades of grey. I felt like a spinning top, gradually losing my energy, minute indications making it ever more apparent that I would soon become entirely unbalanced.

Old colleagues would periodically stop by to see me. They would bustle into the office, smiling and slapping me on the back, telling me it was all bullshit. They said I had nothing to worry about, giving me their reassurances that I was one of the best cops they knew. I no longer knew what to say; my muted responses told them all they needed to know—I wasn't well. Several years ago, the Alex they knew would have been warm, welcoming, bright-eyed, enthusiastically telling jokes. Now, on the rare occasions I did smile, it was with a profound sadness. My chest felt heavy, and simply finding the will to breathe required mustering more energy than I cared to expend. I would often look in the mirror and see how much I had changed. I was pale, I had bags under my eyes, the skin on my hands was dry... I wasn't

even 40 and my hair was starting to show new grey flecks. I should have been taking care of myself, but I wasn't. I think this was when I gave up eating properly—I used to love cooking and baking, and had many, many recipe books. I used to enjoy bringing in cookies and muffins for the shift briefings years ago. Not recognising the spectre in front of them, my old colleagues would slowly drift away, quietly excusing themselves. I don't blame them, their experiences weren't mine, nor mine theirs. They didn't know how to handle the effects of my situation, and neither did I.

My new colleagues in the MPU were all experienced, but, like me, each carried the weight of their own history, emotional baggage they had never quite been able to cast off. Such is what makes us unique as humans, I suppose. I was grateful for their support, and they channelled my energies into productive outlets, which went a fair way to taking my mind off the feelings of impending doom. But those feelings were never very far away.

One evening, I got up and walked out of our hub. I walked down the corridor further into the bowels of the police station, found a dark office, and quietly slipped inside. I sat down in the corner and cried, wishing there was a way I could just cease to exist, as if I had never come to be. I felt so alone.

I maintained contact with my GP, who documented my visible decline in a further entry made on my medical record:

“Disturbed sleep. No appetite. Lost interest in everything. Lethargic. No longer exercising. Poor concentration. Forgetting what he is saying mid-sentence. A little tearful. Feels pathetic. Out of control. Snappier, more irritable. Feels on edge, jumpy all the time. Has occasional suicidal thoughts/ideations but no plans and intent.”

I slowly started to withdraw from life. I turned my phone off with increasing frequency, becoming a recluse. I would no longer leave the house and would spend many hours comatose in bed. When I was up and awake, outwardly I would look as if I was in a daze or a trance, but inwardly my heart was beating rapidly, my brain generating thoughts faster than it could process them. I became prone to muttering to myself, keeping my head down but still watching everything and everyone. On the rare occasions I did go out, I rapidly developed a hatred of being followed. I dislike the term because of the

negative connotations it holds, but I felt myself becoming increasingly paranoid, despite many of my suspicions being justified. The famous quote from *Catch-22* was “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you.”

I spent hours flitting between the front and rear windows each day, waiting for the inevitable. I knew the police were coming for me—it was not a matter of if, but *when*. They were going to get me. Whether from near or afar, I felt they were watching me, just waiting for the right time to strike. I knew I was defenceless, just a sitting duck.

I felt like I was fighting a battle for my sanity, and I turned to writing to ease my mind. For a while it was easy for the words to flow, but I was hesitant over which subject to choose. I had tried composing fiction in the past, and although the one or two people I privately shared it with said that my writing was engaging, I struggled with my ability to manufacture a coherent, fictional storyline. To my annoyance, I found myself subconsciously copying other books I had read, and so I settled on the idea of writing about my experiences in the police, which I hoped would not only be therapeutic, but would also help to provide some deeper insight and analysis into my situation. Had I done everything as I was taught to? Was I *really* blameless in all of this?

I mulled over prospective titles, always feeling better when things had a frame of reference. My first choice was *Diary of a Nobody*, but I felt the relationship to policing needed to be clear. I considered *The Centrex Policeman*, and then settled on *Rotten to the Core*. I eventually started to write, and the words flowed with surprising ease. I would thus spend much of my time in silence, typing away in the artificial gloom, but still mentally disintegrating every time there was a knock at the door.

I maintained frequent contact with my doctors (long gone are the days of always seeing the same GP), one of whom put the following update on my medical record after an extended phone conversation:

“Longstanding problems re: work. He is a police officer and has received a complaint from a member of the public alleging assault and racial abuse. Feels that he has been treated poorly by the constabulary and that there is corruption in the force. Trying to write a book as therapy.”

My mood continued to fluctuate, and although I had previously been set against trying any form of anti-depressant medication, my girlfriend Anna was becoming increasingly concerned about my visible disconnectedness. I felt like my mind was unravelling, my thoughts could not be contained. While eating dinner one day I casually began contemplating different methods of suicide, particularly taken (for some reason) by the prospect of carbon monoxide poisoning. I began to do some basic calculations, eventually considering it might just be easier and safer to throw myself under a train, although it went against my instinct to bring things to a standstill for hours while police officers stalked up and down the tracks, putting pieces of me in bags. I didn't really want my last act on earth to be causing more problems for people. I just wanted to slip away into the darkness, so nobody even noticed I'd gone.

Still maintaining some self-awareness in the face of my increasing downward spiral, I returned to my doctor a week later and explained that I was prepared to give medication a go. I wanted the dark thoughts to stop, to go away. Even though it was the gift I knew I would never receive, I just wanted my normal life back... I'd had enough of being different. My GP duly noted the following:

"Attended with partner. Feeling worse. Researching methods to end his life, although he doesn't want to. Wants to feel better but is in a fog and cannot think rationally. Thinks he needs to try medication in order to feel better. Very aggrieved by the way the police have treated him—reports that they are trying to wear him down."

I was issued a combination anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medication, but worried whether it was too late; I felt I was disintegrating. Looking back at my records now, I suspect the dosage was too low, as I didn't notice any visible improvements, but didn't have the heart or motivation to return to the GP and try an adjustment or an alternative. It's hard to care when you can only see one way out.

One afternoon I spotted a long-wheel-base police van driving slowly past the front of our house. My partner and I lived in a small village in the middle of nowhere, and to see even a lone PCSO on patrol was considered highly unusual and something worthy of local gossip, let alone a 'riot van'. I shook uncontrollably once it was out of sight, panicking, wondering whether to run or hide; I even considered

vaulting the back fence. I didn't see the van again, but it took me several hours to recover from the shock. I began to check the windows with increased vigilance after that.

A week later I heard a helicopter hovering in the sky around our back garden. It didn't appear to be going anywhere and remained in a static position. I knew officers who had worked on the police helicopter unit (now the NPAS), and I was fully aware that, due to their thermal imaging capabilities and high-powered camera lenses, they were often used for intelligence gathering and surveillance activities. I drew all the curtains, my hands shaking and my teeth chattering. I kept peering out, eventually breaking away to dig out some binoculars. Although it was the same model and colouring as the police helicopters (an Airbus H135 with bright yellow panels) I discovered it was marked 'ELECTRICITY' and the occupants were likely inspecting pylons in the area. This did absolutely nothing to calm my fears, and I wondered if the police ever borrowed the power company's helicopters.

Nothing would calm my mind. I tried to continue writing, but found it incredibly depressing and slowly lost interest. I reverted to reading books, my old friends, to try and take my mind off things. Much to my sorrow, I could not sustain my concentration for more than a few paragraphs, even when reading my old favourites—*Alien*, 1984, *The Blue Nowhere*, *Dead City*. Every time I heard a noise outside, I would jump out of my skin.

Instead, I became a manic collector, desperately surrounding myself with brand new books, trying to find solace and comfort—firstly in my psychologically accepted safety net of knowledge, and secondly in my simple acquisition of *things*. I began to amass my own personal library, expanding from owning twenty or thirty books to two or three hundred in a short space of time. My shelf space diminished week after week, to the point I had to order new bookshelves just to have somewhere to store my new acquisitions. I would order anywhere from five to ten books at a time every fortnight, each order giving me a tiny boost of dopamine that I desperately needed. It was becoming an obsession, and my autistic nature led me to calculate where it would be cheapest to buy the books from. Orders from one supplier came with free bookmarks, something else I began to collect. I amassed over a hundred of the bookmarks, which I kept neatly in my bedside cabinet.

Given my state of mind at the time, it wasn't surprising that I started with survival books. The choice was obviously influenced by my desire to run, to hide, to just get away from everything and everyone. I began buying books such as *Shelters, Shacks and Shanties* and the *SAS Survival Guide*. I added *The Wilderness Survival Guide*, *Finding Your Way Without a Map or Compass* and *Bushcraft 101*. This led into the topic of medical aid, and I bought books on natural herbal remedies, foraging, and emergency war surgery.

Once I had a shelf dedicated to every possible aspect of survival, I began to delve once again into the world of conspiracy theories, buying books such as *Disinformation*, *The Falsification of History* and *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*. I even acquired every book written by David Icke. They still take up an enormous amount of space, yet to this day, I have still never picked up one to read.

My focus then switched to sociology, psychology, and philosophy. I bought Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings*, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power*, and Robert Kiyosaki's *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*.

Due to my original interest in books published by Loompanics and Paladin Press, I became particularly interested in books on social rebellion and freedom, buying *Standing Under Freedom*, *Handbook for Rebels and Outlaws*, and Abbie Hoffman's famous *Steal This Book*. I also discovered someone had re-published *The Anarchist Cookbook*, but it turned out to be a poor-quality cash-in.

Running out of space for more books, I turned to buying other things—as I still refused to go outside, I had nothing else to do. True to the cyclic way my interests seemed to work, I looped back to the start—survival. I used the books I had bought to compile a list of essentials, and I put together an emergency 'grab bag'. I bought a rucksack, a sleeping bag, a compass, a poncho, a fire starter, a Cold Steel Survival Rescue Knife, a water filter, cooking implements, paracord, and bars of Kendal mint cake. Packaging everything up so it was ready to go in the event of an emergency made me feel a little better. I recognise now that this was probably some sort of coping mechanism to help deal with the immense stress I was under, and my autistic traits added to the mix significantly.

I began to consider 'prepping', and developed and stocked a three-month supply of food and water, stored securely in boxes in the attic.

Once I had curated my survival essentials, my attentions again turned elsewhere. I began forging a link between the books I owned and the items they were about. Turning to my books on witchcraft, spiritualism and the paranormal, I bought a set of tarot cards, some accompanying quartz crystals, a set of brass dowsing rods, a black velvet cloth, and I ordered several boxes of incense. I even bought an original 1970s Parker Bros *Ouija* board, which—although I never used it—caused an enormous disagreement with Anna. Some of the artwork in the tarot cards strongly appealed to my sense of design, and finding my interests swung back towards books again, I bought beautiful, hardback print copies of Taschen's *Tarot: The Library of Esoterica*, and Patrick Valenza's *Deviant Moon Tarot*. Part of the problem was the fact I was articulate; every time a new package arrived, I could reassure Anna and rationalise my way out of the harm I was causing, explaining away the impact on my finances and our increasingly cluttered home.

I then moved onto my books on martial arts and self-defence. I bought some foam nunchucks, bamboo eskrima sticks, and plastic tonfas, practising techniques from books by Bruce Lee. I looked at buying a wooden dummy for Wing Chun, but they were prohibitively expensive, and I didn't have the skills or tools to make one myself. This path also led me on to books about knife and axe throwing, and I purchased a set of throwing knives, watching several videos on the subject on YouTube. I would later become adept at throwing axes.

I was not a hoarder as such, I was just beginning to amass something tangible to accompany every book I owned—I found solace in the knowledge that I could choose to read *any* of my books at *any* time, and instantly turn to pick up related, physical items which allowed me to put theory into practice. My books were my safety net, they were the one thing I owned that kept me from plunging off the cliff into the depths of the unknown. Unlike others I knew, I didn't go out drinking copious amounts of alcohol on Friday and Saturday nights; I had no interest in raucous behaviour or chasing women. I enjoyed learning, quietly, by myself, in the privacy of my home. I reasoned that the police service could do what they wanted to me. They could lie and cheat, threaten me, even take away my career, but they would not be able to take away my knowledge.

How wrong I was.

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I REMAINED ISOLATED, often refusing to answer the door to visitors. If colleagues rang me and my phone happened to be turned on, I would routinely record each call, and would then blow up every time they tried to reassure me that “everything will be OK”—I knew in my heart that wasn’t true, and I *detested* being lied to. There was no way for anyone to comfort me; I was both helpless and powerless. My old police Inspector, with whom I had always had a good relationship, attempted to carry out a welfare check one afternoon. I flatly refused to let him inside the house, and we sat talking on my front lawn instead.

The prescribed medication still wasn’t helping, and to be honest, I wasn’t surprised. My fears weren’t irrational, and save being admitted to an institution and tranquilized, there didn’t seem to be much that could stop my brain from logically processing the most likely outcome. I returned to my GP intermittently, who added the following notes to my record, simply echoing what had been recorded previously:

“Recurrence of low mood and anxiety. Has some thoughts of deliberate self-harm/suicide but no intent and rational about thinking about it. Finds police unsupportive. No current public contact. Tearful at times. Feels worthless, lost confidence.”

In preparation for the hearing, I received a message asking me to attend the Police Federation offices, where my rep and I were to meet with one of the force’s internal investigators. There, we would be given the ‘bundle’—the stack of evidence the force would rely upon.

So, I met with my new Federation representative one cold, dreary afternoon, and we sat in a converted conservatory, listening as the rain began to patter on the roof. A cup of tea wouldn’t have gone amiss.

There was a brief knock at the door, and the Detective Sergeant who had interviewed me several months ago entered. Her hair stuck to her forehead, her glasses were fogged, and her clothing rested limply on her jostling bulk. Her attitude was no less brusque, and she ignored me as though I wasn’t even there.

“Here’s the bundle,” she said, sliding a ring binder across the table.

My representative picked it up and flicked through it. “Have we got a date for the hearing?”

“It’s scheduled for a week. Starts 16 December.” That was it—she had nothing else to add. She sat there, completely devoid of any character or emotion. No invitation for questions... Just... nothing.

My representative piped up again. “Who’s leading the panel?”

A tiny smirk played out across her lips, the muscles of her cheeks becoming imperceptibly taut. I knew right then that she had been waiting for this question to arrive. This would be it, her moment of triumph.

“Sylvester Dennis.”

The name meant nothing to me, but her knowing smile remained.

“Is there anything else?” she asked, with an air of finality.

“No, that’s about it, I reckon,” my representative replied.

With that, she pushed the chair back and squeezed sideways through the frame, banging the door closed behind her. The hearing would be held only days before 2018 rolled around. Fantastic. What a happy new year that celebration was going to be.

I turned to my representative. “Who’s Sylvester Dennis?”

He sighed, letting the noise of his heavy exhalation hang in the air. I became concerned.

“Let me guess. This is going to be bad.”

He sighed again. “He’ll be leading the panel. He’s *very* anti-police. Makes a habit out of visiting inner-city schools and lecturing socially deprived, urban kids on their rights. I think from memory he’s conducted twelve, maybe thirteen misconduct hearings. So far, he hasn’t cleared anyone. He’s found every single officer guilty.”

I would later find Dennis’s profile on the website for his chambers described him as having “a keen interest in police brutality cases”. Given his part-time activities and his apparent eagerness to involve himself in allegations concerning police brutality,* was he likely to be fair, independent, and objective? Of course not.

I knew then and there that I didn’t stand a chance.

* A phrase borrowed from law enforcement contexts in the USA. Presumably use of the term on Dennis’s website was designed to be accessible to those who would be more familiar with this phrase due to media exposure than with ‘excessive use of force’.

Author's note:

Formed in 2015, there is a 'National Association of Legally Qualified Chairs' for police misconduct hearings, and, as far as my rep informed me, each force is simply supposed to use the next name from a sequential list of available LQCs. Sylvester Dennis had acted as the LQC when dismissing another Constable from my force around four months before my hearing began, and a review of the force's historic misconduct cases showed there were only four hearings requiring an LQC between the hearing Dennis previously chaired and my own.

The availability of approved persons notwithstanding, it seemed highly unlikely that there could only be five names on such a list, and my Federation rep and I strongly suspected Dennis had been deliberately selected because of the racial element to Cooper's allegations; given his performance history, it was possible that Dennis was much more likely to dismiss me if the case appealed to his personal and professional interests. This would have safeguarded the force from having to explain away their previous finding of me being not guilty. Whether the list of approved persons was local, and my force had to leapfrog others in the list to appoint Dennis, or whether the list was national and they simply had to carefully time my hearing so as to engineer Dennis being the next available LQC, the suggestion either way is that the force knew that the 'independence' of the LQC was an idea rather than the reality.

Furthermore, if Dennis *had* been deliberately selected, this would also explain why the IIU's lead Detective for the case smirked when telling us his name... There was no other identifiable reason for her to do so. Oddly, the Police Federation never seemed interested in asking questions about, or verifying, the independence of the chair, let alone pursuing answers from the force.

“And all men are ready to pass judgement on the priest
as if he was not a being clothed with flesh,
or one who inherited a human nature.”

John Chrysostom

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IN PREPARATION FOR the hearing, the Police Federation appointed me a barrister, an extremely sharp individual named Finlay Braughn. An appointment was made for us to visit his chambers in London, somewhere I had never been before. I had always *hated* going to new places, particularly anywhere crowded or busy (I still do), and that was precisely why I avoided nights out and never went on holiday abroad. I even refused to fly, as the mere thought of the hustle and bustle of an airport filled me with dread. At my worst points, it took an extraordinary amount of coaxing by my partner to encourage me to take a break somewhere away from home, even within England.

My Federation rep and I travelled to London by train, and to take my mind off what stressful experiences lay ahead, I examined the bundle as the countryside thundered by. The force had included an investigation report at the start, which included summaries from all parties interviewed. I noted it had been prepared by the lead investigator, the same Detective who had subjected Sahira to an oppressive interview before ironically going off sick herself with stress.

Cooper's account was presented first, and it was probably one of the most unprofessional, grossly distorted, and emotionally driven summaries I have ever read. My summary was provided right at the very end of the investigation report (some twenty-one pages later) and, in comparison, my account was short, bleak, and concise.

The investigation report stated we had been "tailgating" Cooper (the phrase was mentioned no fewer than four times) along with further accusations of us "pursuing" him. To support this, the investigators had included two photographs from average speed cameras positioned along the route, with the accompanying labels highlighting that there was a "two second difference between the vehicles". However, my additional calculations showed that the front grille of our police car and the rear of Cooper's Mondeo were between six and eight average car lengths apart—far from "tailgating", the distance was actually the *exact* safe stopping distance promoted by the

DVLA and Highway Code. These points had been omitted from the force's selectively acquired evidence. The whole thing seemed like a setup, and quickly getting fed up, I pushed the bundle to one side, watching the trees and fields merge into a lush, green blur.

I remember desperately trying to play it cool when we arrived at our destination, London St Pancras International. I had never seen anything like it in my life, and I had no idea why many of the announcements were made in French, until my colleague patiently explained that it was linked to the Eurostar train service. I felt like Paddington, minus the marmalade sandwiches and relentlessly positive attitude.

Mr Braughn's chambers were a short walk from the station, and when we arrived, I remember being awed by the polished mahogany desks and the seemingly endless volumes of leather-bound law books. Even the carpet was expensive. I inhaled deeply... Now at least I could say that I knew what money smelled like.

When he entered, I noted Mr Braughn was a tall, thin man, and it looked like his cranium was marginally too big for his head—in a crude, phrenologically inspired wish, I hoped this was an indication of excessive intelligence; it transpired I wasn't wrong. We sat and discussed the merits of the case over filter coffee and expensive biscuits, several of which fell into my pocket. When he spoke, Mr Braughn was very considered—in the practised manner of the barrister, his speech was clipped and precise. In short, he believed the case against me was weak, particularly considering the fact I had already been cleared once. It seemed grossly unfair that you could be re-subjected to investigation—however, double jeopardy only applied in courts of law, not to an internal investigation. As I've said for many years, *it's their world, we just live in it*. Who "they" are depends entirely on your own perspective, of course.

Mr Braughn began by expressing detailed concerns about the poor standard of the force's investigation. Two witnesses had been spoken to, one of whom was a teenaged boy. Mr Braughn objected to the way both individuals had been dealt with, initially voicing his dissatisfaction with a video interview the Detectives had conducted with the child witness. First, the boy periodically used words and terms which were well outside the typical vocabulary for his age range, suggesting he had been coached beforehand. In further suggestions of

grooming, the youth helpfully described my CS canister as “white with black writing.” However, my canister, which was dark grey, had been securely stored inside a one-piece, black, moulded holster, from which no details or colours could be seen from *any* angle. However, if you typed “police cs spray” into Google Images, you were presented with several photographs of white canisters showing black writing.

When asked how the incident had made him feel, the boy shrugged and expressed casual indifference. Becoming frustrated, the Detectives began to ask increasingly leading questions. In the absence of the witness having any real thoughts or feelings about me, the Detectives introduced the concept of me being “nasty”, an enormously unprofessional (and unlawful) move, which the youth quickly latched onto. The Detectives seemed to crow with triumph at their magical ability to elicit such an observation. The whole process stank, and Mr Braughn made moves to object to the interview, describing it as being conducted in an improper and unethical manner. We readily agreed.*

The second witness was a passing paramedic. As I recalled from my original interview, the investigators had not taken a proper statement from the man, and a brief, unsigned paragraph on plain A4 paper was all they had managed, presumably because the views he espoused were not favourable to their predetermined conclusion. He had described Cooper as “agitated”, “short”, and “pissed off”. This account was missing entirely from the bundle.

Upon being released by my Sergeant, Cooper had driven to his destination. The investigators failed to retrieve the CCTV from the company’s car park, which had now been overwritten. I feared at the time it might not be sought, and had attended their security office to watch it with my own eyes. It had shown, very clearly, Cooper arriving at the site, casually chatting on his phone. He didn’t appear to be injured or in pain, and could be seen trotting across the car park and ducking in and out of doorways without any physical difficulty. It certainly didn’t show someone who had been beaten so severely they struggled to function. Alas, this evidence had now gone.

* I would later discover the force had deliberately neglected to mention incidents where the same teenager had threatened to stab his own parents with a kitchen knife, and during an entirely different incident, had attempted to head-butt police officers who arrested him, thus requiring additional physical restraint. It could hardly be argued the child was a reliable witness, or of good character.

In support of our stance, Cooper's own witness statement declared that the medical condition from which he suffered was regularly checked and well-managed, however the included extract from his NHS record showed numerous missed and cancelled appointments for the same. Cooper also claimed to have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder following his arrest, but his medical records said no such thing. Thus, Cooper had either lied to the investigators, or a significant omission had been made by his GP—the latter, of course, being highly unlikely.

The bundle also included the photographs of the minor bruising I had been shown during my interview, although the force had now seen fit to provide the original colour copies. I quickly realised why they had been photocopied in black and white for my interview, as the bruises were barely perceptible... The level of physical injury was drastically inconsistent with Cooper's account. He described being repeatedly punched, kicked, and stamped on, yet there were no photographs of ripped or torn clothing, and no evidence of footprints on either fabric or skin, something which was surprisingly commonplace in such attacks. In fact, one photograph showed his clothing to be intact and undamaged, despite the 'attack' occurring on a muddy grass verge in damp weather. Cooper also claimed to have been struck an excessive number of times with my police baton. I knew that my issued baton was 21" in length and weighed fractionally under half a kilogram. The end shaft was solid, heat-treated steel. Had Cooper been struck as repeatedly and furiously as he claimed, the chances are great that he would have suffered fractures, nerve damage, and severe bruising at the very *least*. The photographs depicted three red marks, placed where I had reported striking him, which had not even formed into distinguishable bruises.

Tellingly, the bundle contained no photographs of the Ford Mondeo, and likewise, there were no mentions whatsoever in the force's extensive summary of the car having heavily tinted rear windows. This was clearly an inconvenient truth they wished to keep quiet, as it didn't tally with Cooper's narrative of being racially profiled and consequently targeted.

Finally, Mr Braughn declared that he objected to numerous additional documents within the bundle, many of which were either not relevant, or were significantly prejudicial. For example, the force

had decided to include copies of my ‘use of force’ forms from previous incidents, none of which had any bearing or relevance to the accusations at hand. The obvious insinuation was that I had perhaps been investigated for other incidents wherein force had been used—not so. Also, the summary report from the IIU’s previous investigation (in which the Superintendent had provided their reasons for there being no case to answer) was missing entirely. By neglecting to include this document proving my innocence, the force was indicating it had no wish for this earlier decision to be made public. Other pages were simply blank pieces of paper, inserted and numbered several at a time, which fleshed out the bundle considerably.

Mr Braughn expressed concerns that Cooper’s primary incentive appeared to be financial gain, which would make his evidence far less credible. In closing, Mr Braughn agreed to put together a formal Regulation 22 response and a defence bundle, which he would forward to us in due course.

We left London late that afternoon, and on the train journey back home, I realised I felt no better. I had a peculiar emptiness inside me which I couldn’t quite place. I felt as though, despite the sizeable problems with the evidence, our efforts would somehow still be futile.

As we barrelled back home, I reflected that I hadn’t ever read a news article or press release about a police officer being found *not guilty*.

“When the truth is not free, freedom is not true—the truths
of the police are the truths of today.”*

Jacques Prevert

* Quand la vérité n'est pas libre la liberté n'est pas vraie—les vérités de la police sont les vérités d'aujourd'hui.

Author's note:

Seven years later, taking advantage of the analytical capabilities of artificial intelligence, I would enter the IIU investigator's summaries of both mine and Cooper's accounts into ChatGPT 3.5, requesting that it provide a detailed analysis of the overall construction and language used. Cooper's summary was labelled as Text 1, mine was Text 2.

Below is the exact outcome I received, which (upon feeding it back to ChatGPT) was regarded as "a clear and balanced overview of the differences between the two texts."

"Text 1 is significantly longer than Text 2. Text 1 provides a more detailed and comprehensive account, spanning multiple paragraphs and covering various aspects of Cooper's perspective, including background information, chronological events, emotional impact, and alleged mistreatment by the police. In contrast, Text 2 is more concise, consisting of fewer paragraphs and focusing primarily on Pc Linleigh's observations, actions taken during the encounter, and responses to Cooper's behaviour.

"Text 1 contains emotive language used to evoke sympathy and highlight the emotional impact of the incident on Cooper. Text 1 describes feelings of fear, panic, and distress experienced by Cooper, emphasizing the perceived injustice and mistreatment by the police. Examples of emotive language include 'threatened and intimidated', 'completely blinded', 'extremely unwell', 'agonizing pain', 'helpless and distressed', 'severely traumatised', 'extreme pain', 'lifelong', 'traumatized' and 'shaken'. There is much less usage of emotive language in Text 2 compared to Text 1. While Text 2 does contain some emotive language, such as 'shaken by the incident,' these instances are very limited compared to the extensive emotive language found in Text 1.

"Text 1 suggests bias on the part of the author. The extensive use of emotive language and detailed personalization of the account may lead readers to empathize more strongly with Cooper's experiences and perceptions presented in that text. The length and level of detail in a narrative can certainly influence readers' receptiveness and perceptions of the account. Longer, more detailed narratives often provide a fuller picture of events, but they can also be more susceptible

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to bias, as the author has more opportunity to shape the narrative according to their perspective or agenda.”

I would go on to request ChatGPT 3.5 perform the same calculations as I had done on the distance between our vehicles. ChatGPT advised that, if both cars were travelling at a consistent speed of 40mph, a two-second gap would indicate they were 117.216 feet apart. The average European car length is 14.8 to 16.4 feet, so working on an average car length of 15 feet (a Ford Mondeo falls between 15 and 16 feet depending on the year of manufacture), the two photographs proved uncontestedly that our police vehicle was 7.8144 average car lengths behind Cooper’s Ford Mondeo. This is a fairly sizeable gap, certainly too great to determine the driver’s ethnicity when concealed by a heavily-tinted rear windscreen.

Alas, the calculations I made would not be permitted as evidence, and as a result, the record would go on to show that we were indeed “tailgating” Cooper, when the available evidence plainly said otherwise.

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RETURNING TO WORK in the MPU, it was only a few days later when one of my colleagues, an older lady by the name of Helen, took me to one side. Reassuring me that she meant no offence, in a gentle, kindly tone, she asked whether I had ever been diagnosed as being on the ‘autistic spectrum’. I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about—I had almost no experience with autism, and in all honesty, had little understanding of what it entailed.

Helen explained to me that she had two children, both of whom had been formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. She stated that her observations of me over the past few weeks had led her to suspect I might have undiagnosed autism. She had a wealth of knowledge on the subject, and explained that there were often telltale ‘signs’ in undiagnosed adults—being fastidious in providing every tiny detail, a fixation with understanding policies and procedures, immense depths of knowledge in particular subjects, being perceived as ‘blunt’ or ‘rude’ without any underlying negative intentions, an avoidance of openly expressing emotions... Everything she said made sense, and the suggestion really hit home when Helen explained that many undiagnosed adults consequently suffered with stress or depression because they simply didn’t understand how they were supposed to ‘fit’ into the world around them.

I returned home that evening, raising the topic with Anna. The more we researched, the more things started to click into place. Every year of my life began to flash by, and I remembered my childhood—how I was obsessed with a certain cartoon, and would draw the logo hundreds of times, over and over. How I would collect entire sets of toys, going to unusual lengths to do so. My pedantic issues with tastes and textures. My rigid avoidance of social situations because I never really understood the motivations of others. How meticulously I stored my magazines. Suddenly, everything I had ever done seemed ‘odd’—it was as though a light had been turned on, allowing me to see things from a different perspective. My book collecting. My two identical

survival bags. It even applied to the criticism I had received from the IIU, who refused to believe that the length and level of detail in my witness statements could be considered routine or genuine.

So, over the next few days, I tentatively took several different online tests, all of which suggested a formal diagnosis might be beneficial. I returned to my GP once again, who made the following notes:

"Still really stressed. Awaiting a hearing. The evidence against him by the police seems very flimsy. There is a race issue being talked about and I have no reason to believe he is racist. He comes across as pleasant but in crisis. He has talked about jumping under a car but wouldn't. Poor sleep. Has suggested he might be on the autistic spectrum—I would agree."

As the date of my misconduct hearing drew closer, I spent some time flicking through the bundle the IIU had prepared, slowly picking it apart piece by piece. It didn't take me long to discover that numerous other pieces of evidence had been withheld, presumably because they contradicted the force's new change of direction. Without any explanation, Cooper's original letter of complaint had been withheld, as had the account given in his criminal interview—both of these would have been beneficial in identifying alterations to his story over time. The only narrative the force presented was Cooper's final witness statement, obtained *eight months* after the incident had occurred. Elsewhere, my Sergeant had written some notes in a non-approved notebook—these had been withheld, as had details of Sahira's interview, which not only supported my own account, but (given the way she had been treated) showed evidence of bias within the investigation itself. Some hand-written notes from Cooper's girlfriend had been withheld, along with a typed letter from Cooper's own GP, presumably because—like Cooper's medical notes—it failed to support his claims of a PTSD diagnosis. The force had also conveniently neglected to mention the improvement plan issued to the Detective Constable from the IIU for her use of oppressive techniques when interviewing Sahira... That fact would remain buried.

Consequently, I began using the Data Protection Act to submit requests to the force to obtain copies of documentation that hadn't formed part of the bundle—it was starkly clear the force was planning

to withhold them from the hearing. I *knew* the material existed, in both hard-copy and digital forms, and obtaining it (as I was legally entitled to do) might help vindicate me. At least taking a stance to fight back, to show the bastards that I could, and *would*, uncover their secrets, kept me occupied. However, the force knew this, and they spitefully refused to play ball. No matter what I requested, I received hundreds of pages of darkness in response. Entire pages had been overzealously redacted, struck out from top to bottom in a solid wall of black ink.

In one particular instance, I received a call from the force's Data Protection Officer, who reassured me that printouts of 140 emails were being supplied by Special Delivery. I waited in anticipation, and the next day, I opened an envelope to discover just thirteen emails. When I made calls to query this, I was told a flurry of lies—the staff member dealing with the matter had left, nobody knew what the status of my enquiry was, the remaining 127 emails were duplicates, the staff weren't sure what data had been released and what hadn't, and so on. I submitted a number of formal complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office, who refused to assist.

All of this proved that the average man on the street, Joe Public, had virtually no chance in battling for his innocence when someone in authority had decided upon his guilt. Organisations only paid lip service to the notion of promoting individual rights. However, I didn't let this stop me—my requests continued. I began to store the results in folders, which grew into a box file, which turned into a crate. After several months I had received almost nothing of value—hundreds and hundreds of mostly black pages.

The hearing was only weeks away, and against all legal guidance regarding redaction, the force continued to deny me my most basic of rights. I dreaded to think what they were capable of behind the closed doors of a misconduct hearing.

At least it wouldn't be long before I found out.

“Dear Alex, your excellent service to the public has been brought to my attention. May I take this opportunity to thank you for all of your hard work. I am proud to have you on my team.”

Personal email to the author from the Chief Constable

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THE HEARING WAS scheduled to be held at the force headquarters, and the requisite announcements declared it would be open to the public for the full five-day duration. A number of my colleagues expressed interest in attending, however any plans of doing so were immediately quashed by the Detective Chief Superintendent in charge of the IIU: my peers were told in no uncertain terms that they were *not* welcome. This would be the first of many outrageous examples of duplicity that I would face throughout the week.

True to form, my old colleague and good friend Chris refused to take no for an answer. He argued that if he were off-duty, he would be attending in the capacity of a member of the public. Intent on ensuring my isolation, the DCS still refused to allow him to attend. So, Chris changed tactics. With my consent, he would attend as my ‘Welfare Officer,’ a unique position approved by the Police Federation. No doubt furious, the DCS was forced to back down, but—as Chris would find out in due course—the Superintendent would ensure he got his petty revenge.

I arrived early on the first day, joined by my Federation rep, who had opted for a rich, conservative blue suit, and the sombre Mr Braughn, wearing a mid-tone grey. I was dressed in my tunic, although being quite honest, I felt that any effort I went to would be pointless. I knew in my heart that this would be a kangaroo court—a charade with all the gleeful morbidity of a public hanging, which the force intended to fully capitalise upon. The publicity monster needed feeding and I was to be served as the meal.

We had been allocated a tiny, empty office—no more than a cupboard—across the corridor from the hearing room. I stood gazing out the window, watching the cars arrive at the security barrier, where one particularly ostentatious vehicle caught my eye. It was a gleaming black Mercedes. It had heavily tinted windows all around (definitely illegal) and spinning silver wheel rims. It looked like the sort of vehicle you’d see in a rap music video. Instead of proceeding towards the

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normal staff car park, the car swung into a reserved VIP space. Once parked, the driver stepped out; from our vantage point, I could see he was a tall, dark-skinned man wearing a black, three-piece suit, with a green waistcoat, yellow tie, and a yellow carnation. He removed some half-moon glasses from his pocket and, putting them on, began striding confidently over to the reception area holding a black briefcase. He looked like a Batman villain, and I suddenly realised his outfit had been coordinated to match the colours of the Jamaican flag. I felt a sinking feeling deep in my stomach.

I pointed the man out to my Federation representative, who sighed. “Yep, that’s Sylvester.”

I should have saved myself the time and walked out there and then.

"PC Linleigh dealt with me both professionally and respectfully at the station, but what impressed me most was his sincerity and customer focus. I felt as if I had received a truly personal service. As a former civilian police trainer, in my opinion PC Linleigh is a credit to the force, and the sort of officer you would want to be the public face of policing. You should be proud."

*Letter of thanks to the author,
supplied to the hearing panel*

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GIVEN THE MISMATCHED desks and worn carpet, the setup in the hearing room was unnecessarily pompous. As though it were a court of law, everyone was ordered to ‘stand’ and ‘be seated’ every time the panel trouped in and out of the room. In conducting his duties, Dennis was accompanied by a meek-looking older woman who wore a large brooch featuring a painting of a saint, and a senior police commander who had, a couple of years before, been subjected to the intensity of the national media spotlight for committing driving offences. He had been stopped for blasting straight through a red traffic light and, having no desire to be reported for summons, made heavily insinuated threats to the officers who stopped him about his position of seniority within the force. A fine choice from the command team to be pronouncing judgment upon others. In hindsight, one of the other options included a senior officer arrested for shoplifting... I wondered how many other skeletons lurked in the headquarters closet, well away from the public eye.

In a show of support for me, many of my family and friends attended. None of my colleagues apart from Chris showed up, having been successfully scared off by the Detective Chief Superintendent’s entirely inappropriate announcement that they would not be welcome. Aside from a local reporter, the rest of the seats remained bare; nobody attended in support of Cooper.

Our small group (myself, Mr Braughn, and my Federation representative) were guided to the far side of a large U-shaped setup, and staff from the IIU sat the opposite side. The Detective Sergeant who previously interviewed me sat staring at me aggressively—her eye contact remained unbroken for several minutes, to the point I felt uncomfortable, and discreetly sought advice from my Federation representative. I wasn’t sure whether she hoped to provoke an outburst from me, or whether it was an attempt at creating an intimidating atmosphere, however I’m pretty sure that had the circumstances been

reversed, I would have found myself being chastised for witness intimidation. Once again, *one rule for thee, but not for me.*

The hearing commenced with a disconcerting revelation: as a result of Mr Braughn's request submitted two months prior, it was agreed that evidence from the video interview with the teenaged witness was to be excluded. However, the force admitted that they had "accidentally" disclosed the interview footage (as well as the accompanying transcript) to the *entire* panel only the week before. This meant all three panel members had been exposed to the heavily tainted, if not entirely falsified, account the interview contained. I was absolutely appalled. This would form just one of many clandestine tactics the force would employ throughout the proceedings in order to gain the upper hand.

I expected matters to commence with the calling of witnesses, but to my surprise, the panel were suddenly excused as some hushed discussions took place between the IIU staff. In my interview several months ago, I was quizzed about the way in which I tried to extract Cooper from his Ford Mondeo. I had informed the investigators that front-line officers did not receive any 'proper' training in removing a suspect from a vehicle—the closest we came was during one of the annual defence training sessions, where the trainers placed a plastic chair in the middle of the sports hall; officers had to literally pantomime the motions of pretending to knock on the *invisible* window of the *invisible* car, open the *invisible* door, while the driver rigidly gripped the *invisible* steering wheel. At the time, it was something we had all done feeling a mixture of amusement and embarrassment. In closing their investigation against me, the Detective Superintendent had recommended that I be "re-trained" on this tactic, however it had obviously only just occurred to the IIU staff that the arrangements in place for such training were utterly ridiculous, and if I explained, in the public spotlight no less, that the entire police force were reduced to play-actors pantomiming tactics, there would be a significant risk of reputational damage and ridicule.

While someone darted off to make a phone call, the panel were invited back in, where they heard first from Cooper, who slouched in the designated chair and lied his way through the entire process. I think the only truths he told were that he was driving the car, and he ended up being arrested. In-between time, he frequently became

visibly distressed, and on each occasion had to be given a reprieve to compose himself. The panel asked him various questions, choosing to speak to him in a sympathetic, infantilising manner. Cooper's insistence that he had been racially profiled was apparently accepted after being explored only very briefly, and it seemed a strange coincidence that not *one* of the three panel members asked questions about (i) the Mondeo's heavily tinted windows, (ii) the distance between our two vehicles, or (iii) the fact the incident had taken place in the dusk of a late evening, thus restricting the natural visibility.

To his credit, when his turn arose, Mr Braughn unleashed a barrage of difficult questions at Cooper, quickly and successfully painting him as a financially motivated liar. Cooper confirmed that, despite apparently being badly beaten during the incident, he didn't seek any prompt medical attention upon his release, nor could he explain why. He also couldn't explain the lack of a PTSD diagnosis on his medical notes, eventually claiming he must have been "mistaken". Nor could he account for his previous assertions that his longstanding medical condition was well-managed, considering the record supplied by his GP suggested quite the opposite.

That afternoon the panel heard from Cooper's girlfriend, who also lied through her teeth. She claimed I had been volatile and pushy, and that—from her perspective—she felt as though it was necessary to keep me calm during our conversation, lest I explode in anger. She denied saying anything about Cooper being aggressive in the past, and plainly suggested I had manufactured the remark to help get myself off the hook. I sat listening to her, my nerves bristling with indignation. I had *still* not disclosed the existence of the audio recording I had made in the car, which was sitting on a memory card in my briefcase. I wondered how she would have explained the discrepancy between this portrayal of her experience and the friendly, engaged conversation we *actually* had if I'd begun playing the recording to the panel via the portable speaker I had also brought with me.

At around 16:00 the panel called it a day and sidled out, probably to be treated to an evening meal at the taxpayer's expense. We were scheduled to reconvene the following morning when Sahira was due to give her evidence.

It was a long shot, but if anyone could save me, it was her.

“I can only say how impressed I am with PC Linleigh’s work ethic, dedication, knowledge, and genuine desire to safeguard people. He is polite, professional, compassionate, and his investigative mind is second-to-none. If our force had more officers like PC Linleigh, the force would be much better, and the service we provide to the public would be much improved.”

*Character reference for the author,
supplied to the hearing panel*

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THE SECOND DAY of the hearing began much like the first day—it had a disheartening sense of *déjà vu*. It was just the same stuffy room containing the same people with the same predetermined stances and the same entrenched attitudes.

After the previous day's closure, Mr Braughn was provided an opportunity to cross-examine Cooper's girlfriend, which unfortunately didn't gain us much traction; she simply refuted any suggestion she was either mistaken or lying. Despite Mr Braughn's commendable efforts, it was like watching a man try to argue with a brick wall.

It was announced that Sahira would be giving evidence next, and we waited. Seconds turned into minutes—there was no sign of her. I glanced at Chris, concerned. This was unusual. Not having any personal knowledge of Sahira or her ever-attentive nature, he seemed entirely unfazed. With no other choice, we sat and waited, and I listened keenly for any sign of her approach.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Sahira entered the room. It was immediately obvious that she had either been crying or had come very close to doing so. The skin on her youthful face was blotchy, and her eyes, normally bright and alert, were tinged with a telltale redness. She was usually buoyant with enthusiasm, her posture straight and her hair tied back. Now, however, her shoulders were slumped, her gaze downcast. She seemed fearful, and she looked at me, her bottom lip quivering slightly. She seemed to be communicating a message with her eyes: *I'm sorry*.

Now alarmed, I widened my eyes at Mr Braughn. What the fuck had happened? He ignored me, and in desperation, I whispered to my Federation rep. "Something's wrong."

Dennis stared at me pointedly and my rep shushed me.

Sahira's testimony was consistent with her original witness statement, but for reasons I couldn't understand, a pervasive unease overshadowed her entire demeanour. Her speech was hesitant, her words faltered, and her evidence was punctuated by sideways glances

at me. She was certainly apprehensive, but I could detect something more. I was desperately biting the inside of my lip, willing her to *stop*, to just *look at the panel, not me*. But her anxious glances continued, the delegation sharing quizzical looks. Whatever was occurring wasn't part of the pantomime. It looked like Sahira was scared—whether of me or something else, I didn't know. Something was very wrong, and in my confusion, I wanted to reach out, to grip her shoulders and, with warmth in my voice, tell her that everything would be *okay*. I would be forever grateful for her support, but she could just leave, she didn't *need* to subject herself to this circus of illusions—there was no rose tint to my glasses when it came to the panel's supposed impartiality or the fruitlessness of her efforts. I was as good as gone; she might as well save herself.

Sahira had always been the confident one. The one who reassured *me*, who told *me* everything was going to be alright. Except now, the tables had turned. For whatever reason, Sahira had come to know the truth; things weren't okay at all. Whether she was now feeling guilt, fear, or anxiety, I struggled to discern. I knew in my heart that I didn't deserve to be subjected to this charade, but Sahira deserved it much less so than me. She had joined the police service out of pride, her family behind her, applauding her efforts, proud of her achievements; for me, on the other hand, it had been no more than a personal experiment, a drive to prove the Oaf wrong. To see Sahira being drawn into this shambled concoction of politics and deceit was equally as frustrating as it was painful. As she continued to give her evidence, her voice trembling, I wished I'd told her not to come, to just accept that sometimes life was unfair, to forget me and move on. But I knew her resolute faith in what was good, decent, and right would not allow her to do that—it was one of the many reasons I liked her. Like Chris, we were a minority who shared the rare trait of integrity.

After finishing her testimony and suffering a handful of weakly probing questions from the panel, we broke for lunch. Returning to the Police Federation office in an adjacent building, I waited until we were clear of any lingering ears before I asked Sahira what had happened. Her eyes met mine and her lip quivered.

“They threatened me.”

I felt my blood begin to boil, and I heard a loud whistling somewhere in my right ear.

For obvious reasons, it was security procedure within the grounds of the force headquarters to wear a lanyard with a visible identification badge. Sahira explained that she had been waiting in the corridor outside the meeting room when she was approached by two burly men in suits. Neither wore a lanyard; she did not recognise either party. Both promptly accosted her, cajoling her into a nearby room. There, in an aggressive and threatening manner, they told Sahira that her witness statement was a “pack of lies” and that the panel had already read through it and considered it a “pile of shit”, or words to that effect. They warned her that if she proceeded to stick to the same story, she would be considered a liar, and her job would be at risk. She was told that supporting me was *not* an option and the pair urged her to go into the room and “tell the truth”.

I was apoplectic with rage at this—I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It would later occur to me that the Detective Chief Superintendent in charge of the IIU wore a suit and could be considered as ‘burly’, and the behaviour Sahira described would have certainly been in character, given his devil-may-care attitude towards denying my colleagues their rights to attend... He would also go on to make similar-sounding threats to Chris following the hearing. Frightened and intimidated by the encounter, Sahira had struggled to make sense out of it, and for the second time as a result of the IIU staff’s behaviour, had been reduced to tears. She had then been thrust into the hearing room, not knowing what to face or expect, and had been glancing at me repeatedly to somehow try and convey the message that she had been threatened—she finally realised we had been playing with loaded dice from the start. But, although scared, Sahira had held fast, an act I considered remarkably brave.

My Federation rep remained curiously silent while Sahira recounted the details of her encounter, and I remember forming a vague feeling that he was aware such goings on occurred, probably more frequently than anyone would ever dare to admit. It was the Ways and Means Act all over again: the police service acting as judge, jury, and executioner. I demanded my rep lodge a complaint immediately, in that the force threatening their own witnesses was the absolute height of illegal behaviour, and that having been duly menaced, Sahira’s testimony had been visibly tainted. With her appearing close to tears, the panel seemed to infer that I was perhaps

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

intimidating to Sahira, which was not remotely true. I thought about the Detective Sergeant eyeballing me, then the unknown men threatening Sahira—as we were both involved in a formal investigation and public hearing, as far as I was concerned, the experiences fell squarely into the category of witness intimidation, as defined in section 51 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act.

My rep reluctantly agreed that submitting a complaint would be appropriate in the circumstances. However, it says a great deal about the Police Federation’s relationship with the force that the incident would never be mentioned again.

“I have never had any reason to doubt PC Linleigh’s honesty and integrity, or the genuine belief that he always strives to do the right thing and makes professional decisions that benefit both the public and his colleagues. Throughout my time working with him, I have found him to be a high calibre police officer, with excellent investigative skills, who always puts the safety of the public and his colleagues above all else.”

*Character reference for the author,
supplied to the hearing panel*

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RETURNING TO THE meeting room for the afternoon session, the time had finally come for me to give evidence. Someone appeared to have taken my witness statement away, so I asked for a further copy. The odious Detective Sergeant from the IIU stood up and handed me her own copy, failing to realise that she had also handed me a sheaf of email printouts by mistake. Taking advantage of her imprudence, I quickly shuffled the emails into position behind my witness statement, hiding them from her view.

I declined to sit, something the panel seemed to consider strange; however, this was a point of professionalism for me. I had never sat down in a court of law, and I had no intention of sitting during my hearing, no matter how long I might be standing. I considered this to be the height of basic manners and respect, but based on the odd facial expressions the panel were wearing, I didn't seem to be pushing the right buttons. If in the slim chance the panel *did* have any measure of autonomy, letting their judgements be influenced by a wholly irrelevant detail such as whether I chose to sit or stand told me everything I needed to know about the considerations they would give to the *actual* evidence—if they managed to stay awake that long.

Mr Braughn made sure that I was given the opportunity to introduce myself, and he briefly had me confirm my length of service and level of experience. He then ran me through the incident blow by blow. In contrast to how they had behaved with Cooper, the panel didn't appear to be making many notes, and they looked at me very infrequently. I owned numerous books on communication and giving speeches, and it is widely acknowledged that addressing a disinterested audience has enormous negative implications. The speaker struggles to gauge the effectiveness of their speech, becoming demoralised through a lack of engagement. The speaker also feels a decreased sense of rapport, there would be a reduction in the message's impact, and the speaker would suffer increasing anxiety over time. All of these were true, and I began to feel stupid, as though I was trying to address a

train carriage full of bored commuters during the Friday afternoon rush hour.

When it was time for the panel's input, they quickly kicked into action. I found myself being criticised for the length of my witness statement for the second time; regardless of what they had proposed during my interview, the internal investigators had completely failed to ascertain whether excessive detail was out of the ordinary for me. I also suffered criticism for my corresponding pocket notebook entry, which was of similar length. The accusations I faced were simple—because I had been meticulous in my written word, this was considered 'abnormal', a surefire indicator of my guilt. I couldn't quite believe the backwards logic the panel was employing—it was no more than a tabloid mentality. One day a glass of wine was good for your blood pressure, the next day it gave you cancer. Too little detail and you were guilty, too much detail and you were also guilty. Strangely, nobody on the panel questioned Cooper about the length of *his* statement, which was only two pages shorter than mine, and I was supposed to be considered the legal professional. Needless to say, nobody considered neurodivergence as a possible relevant factor, either.

The lightbulb moment occurred when Dennis suddenly piped up. His change in posture combined with the increased volume of his speech indicated this would be a moment he wanted everyone to remember.

"Would you say this was a *normal* traffic stop?"

It was a loaded question; I didn't like his emphasis on the word 'normal'. I suggested that, yes, it had started off as a fairly normal traffic stop, but had quickly spiralled into something wholly unnecessary, thanks to Cooper's immediate response and subsequent behaviour.

To my surprise, there weren't many follow-up questions. The panel seemed to accept what I said on face value—to be honest, they seemed more interested in wrapping up for the day than probing my account; I guessed they had already decided I was guilty, no doubt helped along by the IIU's performance.

I sat back down and quickly rifled through my statement to find the email printouts I had been mistakenly handed. Glancing across the room, it seemed the Detective Sergeant was still none the wiser. The emails had been sent that morning, and documented an exchange between someone from the IIU and the force's lead trainer for

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defensive tactics. He confirmed, just as I recounted, that ‘tactical vehicle extraction’ was practised using a single plastic chair sitting in the middle of an empty sports hall. The IIU staff had then forwarded his comments onward, with the suggestion the topic was best avoided altogether in the hearing, presumably lest it cause the force embarrassment... It was obviously not the kind of information they wanted announced in front of journalists.

I now had even more proof which evidenced the force’s selective disclosure of evidence. Everyone retired for the day, and I carefully tucked the emails into my folder.

“Within the police service, PC Linleigh is an endangered officer. Proactive officers are now few and far between, as officers have realised that being proactive brings you nothing but closer scrutiny, more paperwork, court appearances on rest days and complaints. The common attitude is that it pays not to police in this manner.

The people of our county need more officers like PC Linleigh to be present within our service, as officers like him make the county a safer place to live.”

*Character reference for the author,
supplied to the hearing panel*

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THE THIRD DAY would prove to be the final day, and it revolved around the ‘independent’ evidence the IIU staff had obtained, although tellingly, no mention would be made of the independent evidence they had *failed* to acquire. Their presentation included the two average speed camera photographs showing our police vehicle two seconds behind Cooper’s Ford Mondeo. As the panel’s attention was drawn to the images, I pushed Mr Braughn to interject, to point out that two seconds at 40mph correlated to well over 110 feet, hardly the “tailgating” Cooper insistently described. However, I was promptly told by Dennis to be quiet—my chance to speak had apparently passed. It seemed that boat had sailed.

The IIU staff then played the automatic recordings of the radio transmissions. To my absolute horror, the snippets of audio had been deliberately re-ordered. The very end of the incident, in which Cooper could clearly be heard shouting “Go on, do it again” had been moved to the start, which now suggested I had somehow pushed or otherwise assaulted him at the outset. I protested loudly about this and was once again told to be quiet by the panel.

In growing desperation, I attempted to voice my concerns about the Mondeo’s tinted windows, and this time I received a much sterner warning to shut up. Looking back, I’m not sure why I bothered—I think it was instinctive, in the same way someone being asphyxiated will fight until their very last breath. The entire hearing was grossly unjust, and I glanced at Chris, who was sitting with his jaw clenched, gently shaking his head in disappointment. We were having the same thought in unison: this wasn’t the police service either of us had wanted to join. Eventually, closing summaries were given, and the panel suggested a break to discuss their verdict.

No more than fifteen minutes had passed before, like clockwork, a weighty Detective Inspector from the IIU bustled over to the doorway. As though she had some sixth sense, she peered out, and then addressed the room.

"All rise for the panel."

I knew what was coming, and with respect, the panel could burn in hell. In a show of defiance against the trio's self-imposed authority and the IIU's unjust treatment of us throughout the preceding days, I remained sitting, motionless, with my arms folded. Following my lead, Chris and several members of my family followed suit. It was a minor display of contempt, but it brought me some satisfaction nonetheless.

The panel slowly walked in unison back to their seats. Dennis seemed to be absolutely revelling in the glory of the moment, suggesting he was acutely aware of the tension his slow, deliberate movements brought. His chest was swollen, his head held high, and his half-moon glasses were balanced on the end of his nose.

Dennis stood tall, and although he was about to read out the panel's verdict which would address me directly, I realised he was ignoring me. In fact, aside from the single question he asked me and the handful of occasions he told me to be quiet, he had spent the majority of the past three days acting as though I were not present at all—an enormously unprofessional show of disrespect. Perhaps it was easier for him to inwardly justify his self-righteousness and lack of morality by de-humanising the person whose life he was knowingly about to destroy.

As Dennis began his oratory, I realised this quasi-garrison state responsible for my fate had prepared their verdict long before the token gesture of 'deliberation'. There was absolutely no way that, in the fifteen short minutes which had elapsed, a panel of three people had discussed three days' worth of evidence, let alone having had enough time left over for Dennis to type up a lengthy and eloquent speech, which as it would so happen, lasted in excess of twenty minutes. His discourse had obviously been prepared long ago.

As Dennis spoke, his eyes remained fixed on my partner, Anna. As she had sat throughout the proceedings clutching a pen and pad, diligently making notes, he wrongly believed her to be a news reporter. He had no idea that the single reporter who *had* been present had become so bored by the lack of evidence he decided not to attend for the final day, assuming that I wouldn't be found guilty, and that the whole drama was much ado about nothing.

To this day I have no clear memory of the words that constituted my demise. I do, however, recall feeling like a man condemned to hang,

standing on the gallows whilst waiting for the carefully measured drop as my crimes were decreed to the crowd. Perhaps, like many of those whose last moments were so similar, the words which had been so carefully chosen to illuminate the departure of the damned didn't really matter; the final address had no bearing on the destination.

I remember looking out of the window, watching the trees sway gently in the breeze, a vague memory taking me back to my training as a Special Constable... how I had sat in a not-too-dissimilar room almost fifteen years ago, watching the green leaves rustle in the wind as the branches waved back and forth in the wind. Was this the greeting of an old friend in disguise? Or perhaps a final farewell? I could still hear Dennis, his words a faint, low hum in the back of my mind. The sun was shining—at least I could take some solace in that. I tried to understand how I had ended up here, asking myself the eternal question: *why me?* The Beatles had famously declared that there was “nowhere you can be that isn’t where you’re meant to be,” but I had trouble believing that *this* was what I deserved.

To try to tempt fate away from the inevitably terminal outcome, I had provided the panel with a bound collection of my certificates, commendations, character references, and letters of thanks. The booklet ran to 64 sides of A4 and (as much as I didn’t see eye-to-eye with the politics of policing) it included high praise from almost every rank, from the Chief Constable and Assistant Chief Constable downwards. There were numerous personal letters of thanks; from the Senior District Crown Prosecutor, an associate professor, a senior university lecturer, a prison intelligence officer, a headteacher, and the local Conservative Club. I doubt the panel even bothered to read them.

As Dennis continued his allocution, I considered what *I could* have done, but chose *not* to do. I could have played the recording of Cooper’s girlfriend, proving her blatant dishonesty to everyone present—but, given that Cooper himself had already been caught out in an egregious lie, what would my declaration of the recording’s existence have gained? Deceit and misrepresentation seemed to be the ways of the world, and policing always has been a game of politics, though sadly I didn’t recognise it until much too late.

Somewhere, a bird began to sing. Perhaps there was some truth in fatalism after all—I knew that deep down in my soul, there was nothing I could ever have said or done to change the outcome I was now facing.

“...And so, PC Linleigh, you are hereby dismissed with immediate effect.”

I looked up. Dennis was holding his head high, and the Detective Sergeant sitting opposite me had resumed her intense staring, which was now accompanied by her familiar, sardonic smirk. I had been found guilty of exerting an ‘excessive use of force’ during Cooper’s arrest, but—in a strange juxtaposition of circumstances—my arrest of Cooper had *not* been considered unlawful. This meant my basis for arresting Cooper in the first place, for abusive behaviour and obstructing the police, was still valid. In addition, I had not been found guilty of racial discrimination, although it appeared this was simply because there was no documented “evidence” of such—I suspected, deep down, Dennis preferred to see racial motivation in areas where it didn’t exist.

I once read that the last words of Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, upon being sentenced to death by the Roman Inquisition on 20 January 1600, were “Perhaps you pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it.”* For his crime of considering the existence of an infinite universe, introducing the validity of emerging scientific belief to the rigid world of Catholicism, on 17 February 1600, Bruno’s tongue and lips were impaled shut, and he was burned alive at the stake. Exactly four centuries later, the Roman Catholic Church refused to back down from their stance—in the year 2000, a Cardinal from the Vatican continued to express support for Bruno’s sentencing, torture, and execution. No matter the leopard, the spots never change.

As the panel turned to their left to begin their final, slow march out, anger bubbled up inside of me. I stood up, pointing my finger at Dennis. My words were automatic and instinctive, my speech loud and clear. I had a message, and it was going to be delivered whether anyone present liked it or not. I spoke my words with the fire and passion of true belief.

“You, sir, are an absolute *disgrace* to your profession.”

This denouncement fell on intentionally deaf ears. In a further demonstration of his refusal to validate my existence, in his unyielding belief that I was, and always would be, *nobody*, Dennis refused to look me in the eye. He simply turned his back on me and sidled out with the rest of the panel, whilst the Detective Sergeant narrowed her eyes

* Maiori forsan cum timore sententiam in me fertis quam ego accipiam.

to mere slits. The fact she emanated hatred so openly as part of her everyday job was concerning, but those concerns were no longer mine.

Eventually being left alone, we removed ourselves from the hearing room, slipping back into the tiny office opposite. My Federation rep suggested someone from the IIU would be along shortly to take my warrant card and get me to sign some paperwork. We waited and waited, but nobody came. My rep trotted off to enquire about the hold-up, and returned wearing a puzzled look.

“Nobody wants to come and take your warrant card.”

This really perplexed me. “Why?”

“They’re scared of you.”

And that’s how my career ended. The staff of an entire police headquarters, supposedly cowering in fear... Except they weren’t. They were just afraid to face up to the stark reality of the rotten fruits of their labour. It was never about my warrant card: it was because nobody from the IIU wanted to look into my eyes. They were unable stand opposite me, because then they would realise that, behind the politics and the paperwork, I was *human*, and my life had been ruined.

As we walked out into the sunshine, I thought back to the few seconds of silence that followed Dennis announcing the verdict... They say hindsight is a wonderful thing. I realised I could have railed off about the time I saw armed police officers drag a driver out of his own van, bending him backwards over the bonnet while they punched him repeatedly in the abdomen. They were rewarded for their actions by the force issuing them commendations. I could have waxed lyrical about the time I saw a dog handler strip a man naked, handcuffing him before throwing him down a flight of stairs. Or the time I saw a custody Sergeant erupt and verbally abuse a detainee who had been arrested for immigration offences simply because he didn’t speak English. Alas, I didn’t shout about any of these things because it wasn’t in my nature to do so. Marcus Aurelius had written: “The best revenge is *not* to be like your enemy.” I was not, and would never be.

Anyway, these kinds of events were seldom seen (perhaps even less so now that indoor CCTV cameras have become so commonplace), but they did indeed happen. Unlike me, the officers who did these things remain in the Office of Constable, and perhaps they’ll be knocking on your door, one day.

“But what is then this historical truth, most of the time?
An agreed upon fable.”*

Napoleon Bonaparte

* Mais qu'est alors cette vérité historique, la plupart du temps? Une fable convenue.

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I WAS FREE. It was an odd feeling, as though I had just stepped out of prison after a long period in confinement. The shackles were off, I could do as I pleased—what I wished and when I wished it. No longer would I be beholden to the oddly archaic, pervasive obligations of the police service; until you cast them aside, you had no idea how restrictive they really were. No longer would I have to stop and interject if I was off-duty and witnessed a minor crime taking place, or a collision between hapless motorists. No longer would I have to worry about with whom I associated, lest my character be called into question. No longer did I need to consider whether taking out a loan, thus placing me in a form of organised debt, would cast aspersions on my integrity. The whole overly suspicious system could get screwed.

I pondered over this newfound sense of liberation, contemplating whether it resembled the freedom officers might feel upon their day of retirement. Ultimately, I concluded it probably didn't, as most lower-ranking officers would bid farewell to the job with a boozy send-off, likely held at a local golf club offering discounted rates to members. Despite their departure, these individuals would usually maintain their friendships and connections, embodying the adage 'once a cop, always a cop'. On the other hand, senior officers would exit with a more formal ceremony, receiving a certificate of appreciation for their years of service, a generous golden handshake, and in many cases, the discreet offer of a new, part-time civilian role from Monday-to-Friday to supplement their income... Business as usual, jobs for the boys.

I decided what I was feeling was a different kind of freedom, something rarely experienced. Although I'd been dismissed, I felt a degree of satisfaction in the knowledge that the force was so desperate to get rid of me that they had to break the law, intimidate witnesses, and conceal evidence. I'd been able to match wits with an entire department to the point where a conspiratorial decision had been made: they needed to rig the game to win. It was Richard Branson who apparently gave the wise advice of "Play fair, be prepared for

others to play dirty, and don't let them drag you into the mud." The force hadn't dragged me into the mud—in fact, far from it. To their obvious frustrations, I had remained resistant until the very end. I had not shown weakness or capitulated, and I hadn't backed down even when it became clear my cards were marked.

In fact, I did my level best to throw those responsible under the bus by telephoning the same newspaper journalist who had attended my hearing for the first two days. He was gobsmacked at my dismissal, pointing out the same shocking evidential discrepancies that we had tried to raise, that the IIU staff had so swiftly brushed over. Needless to say, I provided a carefully worded quote about the panel openly refusing to acknowledge evidence, which the newspaper printed across an entire page.

The article obviously had the desired effect and rattled the senior command team, because first thing the following morning I received a phone call from my Federation rep. His paymasters had expressed their displeasure at my new-found freedom of speech, and perhaps forgetting that I was no longer a police officer (and therefore no longer subject to any kind of cover from the Federation) he told me it "wasn't a good idea" to provide quotes to the papers without Federation approval. I think, from memory, I laughed. In the words of my namesake from *A Clockwork Orange*: "Yarbles. Bolshy great yarblockos to thee and thine."

As news of my dismissal spread, the force found itself contending with a small uprising. Across the county, front-line officers began to voice their dismay at the treatment I had been subjected to. Whether during day shifts or night shifts, in briefing rooms or car parks, the same questions echoed. How could an officer, after undergoing over a year of investigation and being fully cleared, suddenly face dismissal for gross misconduct related to the *same* accusations from the *same* incident? Wasn't such a dramatic reversal of fortune unjustifiable? Moreover, if there *were* grounds for dismissal for gross misconduct, shouldn't there also be enough evidence to pursue criminal charges? To many, even without delving into the specifics, my dismissal appeared unfair and nonsensical. I dreaded to think what would happen if they knew the real story about the murky depths to which the force had willingly sunk to get one over on me. Regardless, in an act of rebellious defiance, many officers began refusing to go out on

patrol, they balked at conducting vehicle stops, and declined to carry their batons. I felt some pride upon hearing that—perhaps there was hope after all.

Desperate to stop any leaks from getting out which might add fuel to the growing fire of dissent, the Detective Chief Superintendent responsible for the grand finale of the IIU's theatrical performance abruptly summoned Chris to his office for a "discussion". Chris, having witnessed how low the force would stoop in order to shield its reputation from criticism, had the sense to invite his Inspector along for the encounter.

The DCS, evidently unhappy at the unexpected arrival of Chris's ranking officer as a witness, presumably had to dial back the aggressive display he'd no doubt planned. However, the presence of a third party certainly didn't stop him from openly berating Chris, making a variety of baseless accusations and implied threats which only served to prove the presence of his ulterior motive and hidden agenda.

Despite Chris's choice of 'smart casual' attire for the hearing, the DCS lambasted him for "dressing inappropriately". Incredibly, Chris was then accused of trying to "intimidate" the panel, for simply watching them from the public seating area. As Chris recounted this tale to me, I found myself thinking of the behaviour poor Sahira had suffered—being browbeaten and reduced to tears in her interview, before being accosted and threatened by two large men moments before giving evidence. I also thought of the Detective Sergeant who had spent a fair proportion of her time in the hearing silently and aggressively staring me out. In making such accusations against Chris, the Superintendent proved he was nothing more than a bully, taking advantage of the power differential and the police service's quasi-militaristic understanding that commanding officers were always right. Even so many years after I had last seen the Oaf, his ilk were clearly alive and well in the command structure.

Not yet satisfied with exerting his bloated authority, the Superintendent then objected to Chris's attendance as a Welfare Officer, stating he wasn't sure what "benefit" Chris had brought to the hearing. Of course, he hadn't sought *my* input. I had found Chris's presence incredibly reassuring, and I knew Anna had too. In all honesty, I couldn't imagine what the force might have been capable of had there been fewer witnesses present. Not that my views or welfare

had mattered one iota to the Superintendent. Before leaving the office, Chris was given a stark warning: despite it having been open to the public, he was instructed not to speak about the hearing to *anybody*, with the implied threat left hanging in the air that if he did, the consequences would not be pleasant.

Despite these strong-arm tactics, the fire continued to burn, and it seemed as though some obscure emergency measure was enacted. Members of the senior command team were forced to crawl out from under their respective rocks at the force headquarters, adjusting the bird shit on their shoulders before they began travelling around the county's numerous police stations, giving 'special briefings' about my dismissal, cautioning the increasingly angry troops that they weren't present at the misconduct hearing, so they weren't best placed to comment. No wonder the IIU staff had been so hostile in discouraging attendance. In doing so, though, they seemed to have shot themselves in the foot, as apparently conjecture wasn't conducive to good business either.

My dismissal made national news, but unfortunately outside the walls of the force, opinion wasn't in my favour. Given public sentiment towards the police at the time, I wasn't overly surprised. I made the mistake of checking comments on an online article, discovering an appalling torrent of abuse from many readers (and I use the term 'readers' loosely) who were calling for anything and everything—from my imprisonment to my execution. Frustratingly, it seemed the vast majority of armchair pundits had not actually read the article—even though there was not enough evidence to prosecute me (and in reality, not even to dismiss me), people were still calling for me to be jailed, and even though I had not been found guilty of discrimination, people were openly decrying me as racist. I supposed this was proof of the old saying that mud sticks. I read an endless assortment of insults and threats, and the irony was not lost on me that these were all people who, had *they* been a victim of crime, would have received an impeccable level of service from me. But, once the rabble are roused, there is very little that can be done to quell the uprising. The storm simply needed to blow itself out.

My emotions were predictably turbulent during this period, not helped by the arrival of a letter two weeks later—it was stamped with the force crest. I assumed it was just going to be some kind of official

post-dismissal paperwork, and I tossed it to one side. Curiosity got the better of me, and I picked it back up, tentatively peeling the flap back. Inside was another envelope, this one sealed with tape. It was addressed to me at the force headquarters with the hand-scrawled request “PLZ FORWARD” and had two South African stamps on it. Upon receipt, the force had clearly chosen to simply forward it on to me rather than opening it. Was it a letter of support? Did it contain something noxious? Would there be razorblades under the flap? They had shown no interest in finding out.

I gingerly pried the envelope open with a knife, slipping out a typed and precisely folded letter with a return address of Claremont in Cape Town, South Africa. In a rambling tirade punctuated by exclamation marks, the author spent several long sentences telling me that I was essentially a waste of oxygen, that I was a disgrace to my family and to humanity, that I had no common sense, decency, or compassion, and that I was unfit to work with animals, let alone members of the public. The passages led up to the author’s final, sinister suggestion that I should “review [my] life.” Evidently, the same news and the same presumptions had made it to an international audience. What shocked me was the inclusion of a single, final line: the letter had been conveniently carbon-copied to the Detective Chief Superintendent. I wondered if they knew each other.

I felt mixed emotions—mostly an immense sadness that someone in a different continent, thousands of miles away, had gone to such personal effort to share their opinion. The sender, like everyone else, had obviously swallowed the initial, sensationalist headlines and bylines, without stopping to consider the evidence presented, or whether there might have been some underlying facts or issues to which they were not privy. It wasn’t, however, as though they could excuse their behaviour as being a snap judgement—careful deliberation had gone into the letter’s construction and presentation. It seemed clear that, rather than being anonymous hate mail, the named sender truly meant the words they had written, something I found both frightening and sad. I assumed that, in a way, this was the force’s spiteful way of having the final word. They could hide behind the excuse of respecting my privacy, however, one might have argued that, as the envelope was addressed to me in a work capacity it related to work business and was therefore the force’s responsibility to open prior to sending it onwards.

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I folded the letter back into the envelope, placing it on one side. The problem of trial by media had become increasingly prevalent over the last few decades due to the penetrating impact of television, streaming services, websites, printed news, and social media. Free tabloid newspapers are left for commuters on trains, hundreds of thousands of people across the country get push notifications on their phones every time there's a 'breaking' news article, others prefer to receive daily digests. In our busy lives, time is always of the essence; people rarely stop to read anything in depth anymore, let alone consider whether they are being misled. I felt a sense of mourning for this loss of common sense and considered the plight of others who had suffered a similar fate but lost more in the end.

But, as much as my hearing had been a complete travesty of justice, at least now I was free. As for Cooper, I strongly suspect he received a significant amount of compensation from the force, although I never did find out how much.

“The harm done by ordinary criminals, murderers, gangsters, and thieves is negligible in comparison with the agony inflicted upon human beings by the professional do-gooders, who attempt to set themselves up as gods on earth and who would ruthlessly force their views on all others—with the abiding assurance that the end justifies the means.”

Henry Grady Weaver

The Mainspring of Human Progress

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I BEGAN APPLYING for jobs in earnest, having been told no end of times that working for the police service gave you countless transferable skills. Like everything else about the police, even that aspect had been mis-sold. Most ex-police officers went into three fields: enforcement, investigations, or risk assessments.

To be fair, there were no end of jobs available. I began keeping a spreadsheet to monitor my applications, and unfortunately, it didn't take me long to start encountering problems. First, I was lacking in education, having left school with a handful of mediocre GCSEs. To my frustration, university degrees had become much more commonplace in the time that had passed since my school days; they had since become an essential requirement for virtually any and every job going. I considered that, with the job market being oversaturated with applicants, it made sense for employers to want to reduce their potential risks. Degree versus no degree? There's probably an inappropriate social stereotype in there somewhere. Anna would frequently point out that education and intelligence are two vastly different things; having one does not automatically prove that you also have the other. But that didn't help me—unfortunately, intelligence and capability are not certificates you can wave at people, and employers *love* certificates.

I was, thankfully, able to snag a couple of interviews—I applied for a wildlife officer role with a national agency, finding the hiring managers were thrilled to interview someone of my experience and calibre. Around the same time, I was also interviewed for a planning enforcement position with a district council. On both occasions I came away feeling extremely positive—it had been big smiles, handshakes all around, and the promise of “We'll be in touch soon.” The results, sadly, were always the same: a phone call, a gentle, kindly worded apology, and their best wishes for my future.

The weeks turned into months, and the rejections started to pile up. I soon found I was being turned away from the most routine of

jobs—even roles that required no prior experience or specialist education. Supermarket delivery driver? Postal worker? The answer was always the same: *You've been unsuccessful on this occasion.* I started casting my net further afield. Telecommunications installer, sewage worker, customer service officer, receptionist. No, no, no, and no. I even tried applying for some minimum wage call-handler roles. No. When I asked for feedback, it never arrived.

Although I was always careful to ensure that my dismissal was not hidden or disguised, where it *was* mentioned, I contextualised it with a very brief explanation that it came about following an internal investigation (following which I had originally been found innocent) and that there were no criminal charges. I was well aware that obtaining employment following any dishonesty on an application or CV could lead to accusations of obtaining a pecuniary advantage or fraud. I could only hope people would read between the lines, but sadly, this just seemed to be wishful thinking.

Very few of my former colleagues kept in touch during this time, presumably being fearful of reprisals from the IIU. Incredibly, the department demanded written applications (complete with reasoning) from officers who wanted to contact me, which senior IIU officers could deny without justification. Chris submitted an application, of course, and I also met up regularly with a chap called Brendan—he left the force before I did, after serving not much more than his probationary period. He too, had been investigated by the IIU for spurious nonsense, and despite Brendan being cleared of *all* wrongdoing, the force saw fit to provide a reference to a prospective employer informing them that he had been found guilty of gross misconduct! I don't know whether it made me feel better or worse to know that they treated others on their 'naughty list' with similar, dishonest malevolence.

The months passed, with summer now approaching. I had applied for over 30 different jobs, and out of those, I was interviewed for just four. I had no criminal record, a clean driving licence, my CV was well-presented, my cover letters were articulate, and I had a raft of relevant experience, as well as two commendations for saving lives. I even had an official bloody medal. The sheer number of rejections I faced seemed to be far beyond any normal coincidence, and I could only consider two viable reasons for this.

My first thought was that companies just didn't want to risk taking on an ex-police officer who had been dismissed. They might not have cared what the dismissal was for—the fact I had been dismissed was enough. The idealistic role of the police officer still held an unusually high level of trust and confidence in society, despite the public's increasing distrust of the service when confronted with the ugly reality. As such, I now bore the hallmarks of a person disgraced, and presumably was being treated with the contempt the HR and hiring departments felt I deserved.

My second thought was that recruitment staff were looking me up and discovering the specific accusations I had faced, followed by the resultant vitriolic outbursts from anonymous keyboard warriors. Not wishing to belabour (or indeed begrudge) the point, but social media and the internet had become so invasive that with half an hour's worth of spare time and a cup of tea, you could find pretty much anything about anybody you wanted. With the growth of Google as the world's most-used search engine, it had become increasingly easy for employers to simply enter an applicant's name into the search box to see what popped up. Because this information is legally accessible to all and sundry in the public domain, it's formally referred to as "open-source data." So, if the applicant had an 'open' Facebook page with their profile picture showing them sporting fake gold teeth whilst proudly holding a potted cannabis plant aloft, the chances are that the employer would discover it, and the applicant would very quickly find themselves dropping off the list of prospective employees. In many cases, this seems a common-sense approach—why would any employer want to accept the risk of taking on a new member of staff who, all signs indicated, had a problem with drugs? The same could be said for an applicant who had served six months in prison for domestic assault, or who had been banned from keeping animals due to acts of cruelty. The internet provided all this information at the click of a button, and—given the low number of jobs versus high number of applicants—employers naturally became rather blasé about the process itself and the power they held as a result.

The result was an increased feeling of despondence. I had gone through two years of suffering, leading up to a full-on nervous breakdown. Counselling hadn't helped, and I had finally given into the lure of medication, which I hoped would at least dull my senses through

the inevitable execution which would follow. However, the resulting miscarriage of justice had been worse than I anticipated—the hearing had been distasteful to everyone who witnessed it. For the sake of Anna more than anything, I had tried to pick myself up, to put myself back together. She could have walked away from me, unable or unwilling to deal with the pain I was causing, but she chose *not* to. I wanted to prove that I could do it, for her. But the more I tried, the more it seemed that life rejected me. I felt like no matter how many doors I tried to open, every single one was locked. I had been frozen out of society.

In the meantime, I had turned to my old friend, writing, to try to ease my mind and pass the time. I found it was too painful to continue with *Rotten to the Core*, and so I decided to write a book based on another of my many areas of interest—I chose the name *A Concise History of Modern Impact Weapons*. I began by covering the most primitive of weapons, wooden clubs, moving through time and across continents to explore changes and developments. I conducted historic newspaper research via online archives, discovering and quoting articles from the 1900s onwards, and I even interviewed one of the last American manufacturers of the Baltimore Police Department's 'espantoons'. I began to collect, weigh, measure, and photograph different types of antique weapons, including leather American saps, Irish shillelaghs, South African sjamboks, and I even managed to track down an original, brass Parisian thorn punch.

Whilst writing, I continued to apply for jobs; I reached my 34th job application when I finally struck lucky. I applied for a security role at a corporate headquarters, and the department manager was himself ex-police. He was evidently curious about my dismissal, and his one condition of a potential job offer was that I let him read the disciplinary bundle. I wasn't sure where I legally stood by giving him the witness statements made by Cooper and Sahira, but I agreed to provide my own statement and the general overview documents.

A few days later, we met. He slid the paperwork back over the desk with a look of bewilderment. Gently shaking his head, he privately admitted to me that, in his professional opinion, I had been 'completely shafted', but warned that he would not repeat his personal views to anyone else. He was happy to offer me a role based on what he'd read, satisfied I'd been unfairly treated—at the time, I was incredibly grateful for the olive branch being offered. However, the

PART 2: NAVIGATING THE SHADOWS

world of security is predominantly made up of two types of people: those who had *been* cops, and those who wanted to *be* cops, the latter routinely demonstrating an astounding amount of resentment towards the former, as I would soon come to find out.

“In a culture fuelled by burnout, a culture that has run itself down, our national resilience becomes compromised. And when our collective immune system is weakened, we become more susceptible to viruses that are part of every culture because they’re part of human nature—fear-mongering, scapegoating, conspiracy theories, and demagoguery.”

Arianna Huffington

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UNFORTUNATELY, MY RETURN to the world of security wasn't particularly enjoyable—I was treated with disdain from the offset. Within my first two hours at work, my immediate supervisor remarked that I was, in his opinion, “too good” for the role and “probably” wouldn't fit in. He introduced me to the small and peculiar team, which included a thief, a misogynist, an ex-soldier, and a Serbian conspiracy theorist, a wonderful man who drank his coffee with butter, not milk.

It didn't take long for things to fall apart. Within a couple of weeks, I was tipped off that everyone knew full well about my dismissal; one of the other department supervisors had pulled up the news articles on the office computer, displaying them triumphantly as everyone crowded around to look. As a result, my colleagues would fall quiet when I entered a room—I was effectively a pariah from the outset, and it took me some time to build up even the slightest level of trust, let alone generate friendships.

Only a couple of months into the role, I was quietly informed by the head of our department that a colleague had submitted a formal complaint to Human Resources calling for an enquiry into my appointment, alleging that, in their personal view, I posed a risk to the safety of the ethnic minority staff. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and as I left his office, I felt numb. There was nobody I could turn to, nobody I could confide in, and I struggled to come to terms with how someone who didn't know me could justify jumping to such dramatic conclusions, never mind promoting them to others. Thankfully no such enquiry was forthcoming.

As if this wasn't disheartening enough, my run of bad luck didn't stop there. A few weeks later, I arrived at work to be summoned again. I couldn't quite believe my ears when I was advised that someone was now attempting to organise a protest about my employment—I assumed it was the same colleague who hadn't achieved any results from complaining to HR. I was discreetly advised to take additional safety measures when travelling to and from work, and it was

insinuated that an internal poster advertising the protest had been spotted and removed. I had a familiar, niggling feeling and after a quick bit of research, discovered that my personal details, photograph, and place of work had been shared online amongst a national left-wing group, and various calls were being made by social media activists across the UK (all, I noted, members of BAME communities) vociferously demanding my resignation.

I can't really describe how it feels, simply existing and knowing that people you've never met hate you, or that you've been condemned by misguided public opinion. Maybe *this* was what it was like suffering racism. What was particularly upsetting was that this was a direct result of the public's complete inability to read, digest, and process the news articles, in combination with the high value placed on conjecture over fact. I struggled to find anyone, either nationally or internationally, who I could relate to, who had been through something remotely similar. It's an incredibly disheartening feeling, and your world becomes profoundly bleak. All your efforts become futile, because no matter what you do, you come to realise that it will *never* be good enough... Nothing will satisfy your worst critics.

Even in the midst of these feelings, I understood that the number of people who made up these extreme left-wing groups was minuscule in comparison to the general population, but there was something soul-destroying about the malice with which they operated, hiding behind meaningless usernames and avatars. They had a complete lack of awareness of, or even interest in, the possible consequences of their actions. The Dalai Lama once said: "Out of six billion humans, the troublemakers are just a handful," but that was no consolation—that small handful posed no less danger simply because of their disproportionate presence.

I began to feel a separation slowly occurring, a growing divide, as though I was no longer a valid part of society. As I came and went from work, not knowing who I could trust, feeling an increasing disconnectedness, almost as though I was melting away. I suppose my detractors were guilty of some kind of discrimination, or perhaps it was just wholehearted ignorance—how could someone found not guilty of racism be so racist that their mere existence, their defiance in continuing to *live*, sparked such outrage? But then again, extremists never seemed to need actual proof. At the more extreme (and typically,

less rational) ends of the political spectrum, people were much more content to rely on hearsay, gossip, and rumour-mongering as the preferred form of *de facto* evidence. It seemed nowadays everyone was considered racist by default, and had to prove—through Facebook filters, hashtags, and other social media rubbish—that they weren’t racist, that they were proudly *anti-racist*, a term that became as meaningless as it was ubiquitous. It was just another form of herding, the same old sheep mentality.

Every day swung me into extremes, and it was so tiring. When I was at work, I became filled with heightened anxiety and paranoia. When I left work, I returned to the familiar state of depression, slumping into a void of disinterest and negativity.

Elsewhere, it seemed the shady and dubious practices of my local police force were never far away. I knew that my workplace contained a Muslim prayer room. It was a closely guarded secret that the security department had installed a covert CCTV camera, disguised as a smoke detector, directly outside the prayer room entrance. The footage recorded to a portable hard drive secured behind the ceiling tiles, and the footage was routinely passed to officers from Special Branch (a part of the Regional Special Operations Unit) who wished to discreetly monitor who precisely came and went from the prayer room. It was a gross invasion of privacy and entirely contrary to the authority’s own policy on use of covert CCTV—none of the users of the room knew the camera was there, or that their images and details of their movements were being passed to the police who were, presumably, investigating potential extremism and passing matters of interest along to the Security Services in London.

As the months passed, the issue of my dismissal weighed increasingly heavily on my mind. Given the way I had been treated in my current role, along with the general calibre of my new colleagues, I had already decided that I didn’t want to remain in the job any longer than necessary. I could do better.

Thankfully, the threats began to die down, but the internal problems didn’t. I discovered a small group of staff who, led by a failed police applicant, were plotting to oust me. I found proof they had been listening to my (unlawfully monitored) phone calls, and I discovered that I was being spied on using the internal CCTV network. In a distinctly unsavoury turn, I overheard one of the group talking about

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killing me by shooting me—one individual openly suggested that that buying a pistol on the black market and risking the prison time for murder would be “worth it”, presumably to save the department all the hassle of dealing with the political threats.

While I knew there might be no actual intent behind these chilling words, the mere mention of such violence left me deeply shaken. Any parent will tell you that words can be just as hurtful as actions, if not more so, and I couldn’t afford to take any chances by staying in such a toxic environment. Almost immediately, I began applying for jobs elsewhere. Thankfully, being employed by a well-known company had given me a foot on the proverbial job ladder, and I was able to move into a new role for which I had much higher hopes.

“Sometimes bad luck hits you like in an ancient Greek tragedy, and it’s not your own making. When you have a plane crash, it’s not your fault. It’s not that you manufactured this disaster.

But I have the clear knowledge that my last resort, in all the travails and tribulations, was language.”

Werner Herzog

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MY NEW JOB was working as a Security Supervisor for an international manufacturing business. I hoped that working on an industrial park might mean I was further away from the public eye, and for the first few hours at least, everything seemed great—I was welcomed by the majority of my new colleagues with open arms. But society's simmering bitterness and hostility was evidently still bubbling not far beneath the surface.

During my first afternoon, an older woman cornered me, a knowing glint twinkling in her dark eyes. Without introducing herself, she rudely demanded to know where I worked in my last job, so I told her. Sneering, she continued to probe, asking where I worked *prior* to that. I knew precisely where the conversation was being steered, and I had no intention of making any statement about my time as a police officer. I simply responded that I was a graphic designer.

"That's not what *I've* heard."

I tried to shrug the encounter off. "Well, you're listening to the wrong people, then."

She made no attempt to hide her mixture of contempt and disgust, and giving up, I simply walked away. Her direct approach left me shaken—my last job had been ruined by the ever-present shadow of the police, and now this one looked to be heading in the same direction, and I hadn't even finished my first day. It was supposed to be a new job, a new start for me—I'd felt I'd already paid one hell of a debt to society for something I hadn't done, so why couldn't I just be allowed to live in peace?

A few days later, I was introduced to another of my new colleagues. I smiled and shook his hand, and in response, he snidely greeted me with "Hello, PC Linleigh." I had never met the man before, and his comment seemed a cruel and unnecessary dig. As time passed, many people spoke highly of him, and I was never sure whether his comment was a show of contempt, or just a poor attempt at being

clever, perhaps his way of demonstrating a ‘know-it-all’ attitude. Whatever it was, it left me saddened and feeling decidedly downcast.

In 2022 we were introduced to our new manager, an overweight, balding man called Gary Lancaster. Rumour had it that Gary had been pushed from pillar to post in the organisation, being bounced around from department to department because of his unrivalled tendency to spread malicious gossip. He was the sort of individual who thrived off drama, turning every day into a live-action TV soap opera. He was also purported to be a vindictive bully, and many staff gave him a wide berth. Perhaps it’s a fault of my ASD that I have always been too trusting, too prepared to give people the benefit of the doubt. I supposed the proof was in the pudding—extending the hand of friendship had certainly done me no favours over time.

As Sophocles had once said, “Dreadful is the mysterious power of fate.” It didn’t take long for Gary to latch onto me, and I have since spent countless days, sometimes lying awake in the dead of the night, wondering why such poisonous people are persistently fascinated with me, sometimes to the point of unhealthy obsession. Perhaps it’s because I present myself as confident and outgoing. Maybe it is because I quietly consider myself intelligent and capable. It could possibly be because of my physical presence—I’m taller than average, and broad-chested. Perhaps it is a combination of all of these things which agitates others, promoting spiteful behaviours arising out of perceived inferiority or some other motivation. It’s something I will probably never understand. Despite still waiting for the slow wheels of the NHS to turn in offering me a formal autism assessment, the time since my MPU colleague had first mentioned ASD had allowed me much opportunity for introspection and self-examination; I was all too aware of my behaviours associated with the condition and the way they set me apart.

Mindful of all of this, I tried my best to set things off on the right foot, but Gary wasn’t having any of it. Frustratingly, it seemed many of my autistic traits offended him. First, he seemed to operate with the bizarre expectation that I would be his best friend rather than just a work colleague, something I found very hard to adjust to. When this didn’t come to pass as he hoped, he became stuffy and distant. Second, I was much more comfortable with putting things in writing than making verbal agreements, but Gary absolutely detested my emails,

documents, and records, which he frequently and vociferously complained were “unnecessary” and “long-winded”, although I suspect part of that was a defence mechanism, as unfortunately for him, he wasn’t known for his intelligence. Third, he seemed intent on believing that my interest in, and knowledge of, company policy and procedure was part of some orchestrated scheme intended to embarrass him or show him up. Finally, he also *hated* my passion for justice; I held everyone to the same standards of behaviour, whereas Gary felt there should be greater allowances made for those higher up the managerial chain. Ultimately, I tried to maintain an air of professionalism and objectivity, but no matter what I did, he took everything I did as a personal insult. Professionalism was interpreted as me being “cold”, and objectivity was a “lack of emotion”. Sometimes you’re just damned if you do, and equally damned if you don’t.

Eventually I ended up being forced to resign—yet again—after Gary’s dislike of me intensified into nothing short of overt hatred. After enduring just six months of his erratic supervision, out of the blue he made nearly twenty-five disciplinary allegations against me. His complaints met the criteria for gross misconduct, and were dutifully investigated by HR, who (many months later) confirmed there was no evidence, and therefore no case to answer. The carefully worded letter from the investigator admitted there had never been *anything* to corroborate Gary’s accusations which, as they discovered, were subjective and baseless. The senior management kept the day-to-day running of the department at arm’s length, and took little interest.

As a result, my working situation became untenable—how could I be expected to work for someone who had effectively manufactured a situation in a malicious attempt to have me sacked? I reached the point where I couldn’t sleep, I wasn’t eating properly, and I certainly wasn’t taking care of myself. I returned to my GP, who made the following note on my record:

“Stress and low mood for years. Reports low mood, feels flat, little enjoyment. Poor sleep, ruminates a lot about work. Feels tense, stressed and worried all the time. Work a major driver of his symptoms. Dark thoughts—‘what’s the point’—quite often but no formulated plans and wouldn’t act on. Ex police man—dismissed, very stressful end of police career. Current employer seems to be putting him under pressure and stressed he may lose his job again.”

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Eventually, I couldn't hack the stresses of my job any more. I had been pushed off the edge into the abyss. No longer able to cope with the negativity, the blame, the threats, the accusations, or (what I believed to be) the discrimination, I resigned from my role, preferring to take my chances being unemployed than risk being targeted a second time and potentially losing my job. I couldn't afford another dismissal on my record, and finding myself in the darkness once again, I desperately hoped it wouldn't be long before I discovered the light.

In the meantime, at least, I could focus on the positives—Anna and I were due to get married, spring was turning into summer, and perhaps I could spend some time outdoors with my camera in-between my job hunting. Driving home for the last time, I didn't know where I would go or what I would do, but then again, that wasn't much different to the rest of my life to date.

“When I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals.”

Anne Frank

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AFTER A LONG discussion with Anna, I decided that, following the appalling way I had been treated by my previous employers, I needed to understand the way my brain worked, to get some clarification on whether I was indeed neurodivergent (as everything and everyone suggested) or whether I was just... *different*. So, I decided to take the plunge, and, in lieu of any motion from the NHS, we paid for a private autism assessment, to be conducted by a friendly, professional psychologist who specialised in the diagnosis of both adults and children. It wasn't cheap by any means, but I truly hoped it would give me some enlightenment and would help me come to terms with something I subconsciously wanted to deny.

The diagnostic process itself was fairly lengthy—it involved multiple interviews and questionnaires, which were also conducted with family members because they were often able to provide a more independent (and sometimes more reliable) viewpoint.

It was only when I found myself sitting face-to-face with the psychologist that I realised the true depth of my masking abilities. As the interview began, I felt like two people—I could 'switch on' a warm, funny, engaging personality when I needed to, and while most people never saw through this façade, I *hated* doing it; most of the time it was fake, and the effort left me emotionally exhausted. I could only liken it to how I felt attending a wedding. I had to smile, shake hands, and pass the time making small talk with people I didn't know, didn't care about, and would never see again. In reality, while everyone else was laughing, joking, and having a good time socialising, I just wanted to leave, getting as far away as possible.

As I spoke to the psychologist, I began battling against my instincts. I usually spoke carefully, giving thought to my words, and I preferred not to make as much eye contact as I had found other people tended to like. Perhaps this made them think I was shifty, dishonest, or hiding something, I don't know. I also knew that most people hated silence, and I usually tried to fill it, burbling away, often providing too much

information. I would also notice small details other people missed, sometimes commenting upon them, which usually caused an eyebrow or two to raise. One of the framed paintings on the wall wasn't quite straight. I could see slightly faded patches on the sofa I was sitting on, where previous individuals undergoing the same process had gripped the arms, nervous perspiration from their palms staining and corroding the rich colours of the fabric. I wanted to point out the off-kilter skylight, suggesting the room had been partitioned.

I tried to resist all of these urges, and by far the most difficult task was being honest about introspection—telling the truth about the impulsive thoughts and behaviours that you *knew* were there but had become used to avoiding, suppressing their existence, because over time you'd come to realise their presence indicated you were very different to the people who surrounded you. Society had always had a way to single such people out, using labels as a warning; the 'odd one out', the 'black sheep', or the 'outcast'.

I found some relief in talking about my collecting habits, and this seemed to be a particularly common element of ASD. I spoke about my desire to learn first-hand, to physically touch and experience, and to store, to keep things safe. I explained about my large collection of two-way radios, action cameras, books, hats, films, and many other things that most people would find bizarre. In some ways, collecting was problematic—it damaged your finances, cluttered your home, and risked societal misunderstanding. There was a fine balance to be struck between the benefits collecting brought, and the dangers it invited along for the ride.

The outcome, which arrived a month or so later, was perhaps no surprise: I was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The accompanying report was certainly enlightening and helped paint a picture of the extremes of typical, neurodivergent behaviour I had never been able to step back far enough to see. As the saying goes, I couldn't see the wood for the trees.

The psychologist had expressed surprise at several things during our interview, which she encapsulated as follows:

"Collecting sets is important to Alexander. He explained that he does things that most people would consider odd however, he was always proud of this and thought it made him interesting. In addition,

PART 2: NAVIGATING THE SHADOWS

Alexander reports having a specific interest in walking sticks, and he owns a collection of around 15. He particularly likes the dark wood ones. He demonstrated specific acquired knowledge of this, as he explained the blackthorn plant. He finds that he will get into a topic such as survival and then branch off into sub-categories of these topics.

“Alexander has a collection of handcuffs, including Spanish, Old English, Modern English, American, German, and Russian ones. [...] Alex likes to have complete sets of certain books. He has a physical and electronic collection of books; he has had to keep some of these in storage. He has had metal label plates made for his shelves to store them according to category. He can have around 10–20 of these books on the go anytime.”

None of my habits or interests were regarded as concerning, perhaps just a little strange, the excessive nature of my interests falling outside the boundaries of ‘normal’, socially accepted behaviour. However, the psychologist had noted the importance of keeping them in check—they could have a detrimental impact on my personal life and risked having a negative effect on my finances. Several books on ASD were recommended, which I promptly obtained with the intention to read.*

Now I had a starting point to understand myself, as well as a frame to work from. But first, I needed to get back to applying for jobs... if anyone would employ me. I couldn't shake the thought that my dismissal from the police had left me scrabbling for the kinds of jobs where my face (and my mind) just didn't fit. No matter how much I tried to keep my head down, it seemed I was destined to stand out from the crowd.

* It is only after writing this that I was prompted to recognise the irony of a psychologist recommending that I keep some of my autistic coping mechanisms in check, only for me to compulsively buy books about autistic behaviour, thus adding to my ever-growing library... Couldn't see the wood for the trees indeed.

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AFTER THE DISASTERS of my last two roles, I finally managed to pick up a job that looked promising. I was forced to take a drop in pay, but I became employed as a Security Guard for an international food distributor, working at one of their many warehouses, several of which were spread across Europe.

It felt like my luck was finally starting to change for the better—I'd spotted the job advertisement less than a week after receiving my autism diagnosis, the interview process was smooth, and I was offered the role within 24 hours. In addition, the department manager was bubbling with enthusiasm and promised that I would “really love” the team. It sounded too good to be true.

In the run-up to starting the job, I constantly wondered why other ex-police officers slotted so readily into managerial roles, which naturally offer better pay and career prospects. It’s something I have never understood; I now suspect it could be attributed to a combination of simply believing in yourself and having the ability to sell your skillset. Unfortunately, I had spent the last few years having any remaining faith in my own abilities pummelled out of me by unpleasant, opinionated, and often unskilled bullies who would much rather I vanished off the face of the planet. I was never good at self-promotion, and the little confidence I had picked up over the past decade or so had been eroded to mere fragments. In an indication of the psychological state I had been reduced to, I was committed to the idea I had nothing to be proud of, and I had spent more time trying to downplay my past than upsell it. So, it was a pleasant turn-up for the books to be offered the opportunity.

Unfortunately, the damage that had been done to me became evident from the moment I put the phone down. I began second-guessing the job offer, waiting for the incoming call where it was suddenly revoked. I was worried about fitting in with my colleagues. I panicked about how I would deal with people asking probing questions. Instead of feeling excited or even apprehensive, I began to feel scared.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

Unfortunately, I had learnt from personal experience that whenever I permitted myself to feel hope, life seemed always to find a way to snatch away my prospects.

As my starting date drew closer, I couldn't help but remember how I felt on that first day at secondary school, and I found myself daydreaming, becoming a child once again. My mind wandered back to when I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of individuals, the noise, the environment, the colours, the maze of corridors, the feelings of intimidation that arose from being surrounded by people and processes I didn't know, the lack of understanding of what it all meant. Not knowing how or where I was supposed to fit in, I backed away, constantly letting everyone else push, shove, and explore. I found corners to stand in, at least until I found the sanctuary of the library. I spent every moment fearing social interaction, avoiding questions, shying away from others, not understanding anything.

I went to wash my face in the bathroom, hoping the cool water would help calm my racing nerves. I looked at myself in the mirror. I was in my forties and all I desperately wanted in life was to be accepted. Perhaps this was a sign that my efforts had been wasted, that every decision I had made had been wrong. Or was it proof that we had no *true* choice, no agency, no autonomy? Maybe life was a script—perhaps we were pre-destined to pick the options we felt were a matter of choice, when they were actually anything but. Whatever the truth, perhaps this would just be the new start in life that I needed.

I crossed my fingers and hoped.



PART 3

Confronting the Abyss

“The past is never where you think you left it.”

Katherine Anne Porter
Ship of Fools

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I'D BEEN EMPLOYED for a little over two months so far. Everything in the job was going well—in fact, better than I could have ever anticipated. Contrary to my fears, my manager's predictions had come true; I made a great first impression, and, to my immense relief, I found the overwhelming majority of my colleagues were wonderful. The workforce was incredibly diverse, and I quickly formed deep, personal friendships with colleagues of many different nationalities: Polish, Ghanaian, Romanian, Indian, Ukrainian, Italian, Pakistani, South African... it was a true international community.

For the first time in a very long time, I found myself enjoying my job, and my worries and fears gradually began to melt away. Nobody had asked about my past, and more importantly, nobody cared. I was able to spend every day just focusing on the tasks at hand, and my autism began to finally prove itself to be more of a help than a hindrance. I threw myself into my work with pleasure, often choosing to work 14–16 hours a day, typically sustaining myself with a single 20-minute break. The management team were impressed with my knowledge, enthusiasm, and work ethic, and there was talk of a promotion on the line. They wanted me to visit other warehouses, to try to improve some of the security infrastructure. I arrived early and finished late, and despite the long hours, almost every day brought a smile to my face.

At around 05:45 on 23 January 2024, I quietly left my house to drive to work. I'd woken up earlier than usual and decided on a whim to take Anna's Mini. On the way, I stopped in at the local 24-hour supermarket. Intending to surprise my colleagues by giving them a bit of a positivity boost, I bought ten share-size pouches of Maltesers to hand out. Not wishing to spend the day surviving solely on chocolate, I also picked up a BLT sandwich for my lunch.

I left the shop, slipping back into the car, notching the heating up and resuming my Spotify playlist. I remained acutely aware that it didn't take much to knock my emotions off-kilter, so when I felt happy,

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I often played loud music that encouraged and sustained the same mood. One of my favourite tracks, *Ring The Bells* by James, resumed, filling the warm silence of the car.

*When you let me fall,
Grew my own wings,
Now I'm as tall as the sky.
When you let me drown,
Grew gills and fins,
Now I'm as deep as the sea.*

As I pulled out of the car park, I sang to myself as I drove. I had always enjoyed early starts and late finishes—empty roads were so much more pleasant and stress-free. My workplace was only a short drive away, and it was an easy commute at this time of day. I began to feel like things were finally slotting in place. My long-standing debt to society had been paid off, and I was finally starting to put the traumatic experiences of my past behind me.

I pulled into the car park at around 06:20, reversing into my usual parking spot. I hopped out of the car, whistling as I walked, a cheery habit I enjoyed when feeling particularly upbeat, and I passed through the industrial turnstiles. I breezed through the reception area, making my way to the security office. I popped the large bag of Maltesers under the desk and started up the laptop before contemplating my usual toffee latté to kick-start the day. As my team began arriving for work, we smiled and shook hands before I gave them copies of their duty roster.

At around 07:00, I was chatting with one of the cleaning supervisors when I received a radio message from one of my colleagues, Sahib.

“Alex? Are you there, mate? The police are outside.”

That was weird—police didn’t usually start their day shifts until 07:00, so something must have been afoot for them to be out and about this early. I responded, reassuring Sahib that I would nip outside to see how we could help. As often happened when I had to deal with the police, my mind reverted back to my own days wearing the uniform. It had been seven years since I was dismissed, and the incident with Cooper had happened ten years ago. For me, that passage of time still felt like the blink of an eye. My wounds had never quite healed, and it

took me a very long time to overcome my overt feelings of resentment, although unexpected occurrences like this still caused me ripples of panic. I didn't consider my fears to be illogical or unjustifiable. I had never tried to kid myself that there were merely a handful of bad apples, nor did I believe (at the opposite end of the spectrum) that every single officer was actively participating in the corruption going on around them. Much of the wrongdoing was orchestrated, encouraged, or tolerated from the top down, resulting in a continual ebb and flow of officers involved in unscrupulous practices.

The reception door slid open gracefully, and as I made my way along the front of the building, the morning air felt cold and crisp as I drew it deep into my lungs. I took a couple of deep breaths, inhaling the cool morning air to help calm my racing thoughts. Not far away, Sahib zoomed in, tracking me using the CCTV camera above my head as I exited the building. It was still dark outside, and I could see two uniformed police officers standing at the turnstiles. I watched them enter at the same time I spotted one of my Sikh night shift colleagues leaving. He was a new employee, young and inexperienced. Over the past few weeks, I had tried to mentor him, giving him training and encouragement, and the broad smile he wore while he enthusiastically waved goodbye to me was the last thing I saw as a free man.

As the officers approached me, I greeted them warmly. With the benefit of hindsight, I might have reacted differently—not that it would have made much difference to the outcome. I smiled.

“Morning. To what do we owe this pleasure?”

Both were sizeable blokes, and neither returned my smile. I'm over six feet and both officers were taller than me, which was becoming more and more unusual given the penchant of the police service to employ underfed university graduates. The bright yellow plastic of their Tasers contrasted sharply against the black fabric of their tactical vests, and they approached me swiftly and professionally, one standing either side, blocking my path.

“Are you Alexander?”

My stomach lurched as though I had plunged off a cliff. I knew from experience the tone, the question, and exactly what would happen next. I felt myself break out in the familiar cold sweat of panic, and within a split second of me confirming that I was indeed Alex, they immediately and roughly took hold of my arms just above the

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

elbow. According to them, the time was 07:08—I had been at work for around 45 minutes.

“Unfortunately, Alex, at this time, we’re arresting you on suspicion of possession of a section 1 firearm, following a warrant at your home address.”

At the precise moment I was being arrested, my home remained exactly as I had left it. It was still in darkness, Anna and our two dogs were fast asleep, and the driveway was empty.

The police had not visited.

No warrant had been executed.

“He who tells a lie is not sensible of how great a task he undertakes;
for he must be forced to invent twenty more to maintain that one.”

Alexander Pope
Thoughts on Various Subjects

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“YOU DO NOT have to say anything, but it may harm your defence—”

Firearm? A warrant? At my house? My heart was thumping rapidly. As one officer cautioned me, the other one spun around, and I felt the cold steel of the handcuffs being applied to my wrists. I heard the ratchets snap into place, and I was bent forward as the officers used a key to lock the handcuffs into position. Sahib was watching the situation unfold on the CCTV monitor in shock. People leaving work were staring, open-mouthed. Faces began to appear at the windows. *Alex was being arrested.*

“—anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?”

From memory, I think I responded, “This is absolutely bonkers. At work as well?”

One of the officers reached into my front left trouser pocket and deftly removed my phone. It was obviously a practised move—I barely felt it happen. “What’s the pin code, chap?”

I assume it was the effects of the shock, but I had no idea what he was talking about—his words sounded garbled and didn’t make sense. Suddenly, my brain kicked into gear and as his words filtered through, it dawned on me. He wanted the PIN code to my phone. Confused, I asked him why he needed it.

“We just want to put it in flight mode, mate, that’s all.”

Sadly, I didn’t know it at the time, but this was a lie. Contrary to what people expect of me, I have always been *far* too trusting; it’s apparently a common trait amongst people with ASD. So instinctively I gave the officer my PIN code, failing to remember amidst the fog of confusion that the phone could easily have been put in flight mode *without* it being unlocked—the feature is built into devices for precisely this reason. Being arrested in front of my colleagues left me badly shaken. People I had worked hard to build up a rapport with were staring slack-jawed at the encounter unfolding before their eyes.

Looking back, I get angry. I firmly believe the police deliberately created a stressful and embarrassing situation, which they exploited to obtain my phone PIN. This approach wasn't just a theory either: an article published in *Time* magazine concerning the effects of police use of dishonesty and generally deceptive tactics explained:

*"Basic psychology research in a multitude of venues shows that misinformation can alter people's visual perceptions, beliefs, emotions, physiological states, memories, and the decisions they make. Across the board, these effects are found in adults; they are even greater in children."**

I had been arrested within mere seconds of the officers approaching me, and the removal of my phone and their demand for my PIN code occurred *immediately* after I had been simultaneously manhandled, handcuffed, and cautioned—there was no discernible gap between the events, they were all rolled together in a single, fluid, pre-planned interaction, giving no time for thought.

It was a medically recognised fact that there were correlations between increased levels of stress and decreased cognitive abilities; the same had been suggested in relation to elevated heart rates. In short, the more stressful the situation, the less effectively and rationally an individual would function. This explained the common wandering of bewildered-looking people who had witnessed a traumatic event, as footage of the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York city showed. The situation I faced would have been difficult enough for a neurotypical person, and I hadn't been given *any* chance to explain my ASD, how the impact of the situation might affect my neurological processing—nothing. In essence, because I wasn't afflicted with any discernible *physical* disability, the police considered me ripe for exploitation, no matter what might be going on invisibly inside in my brain.

As the officers led me out of the gates in their firm grip, the underlying sense of panic I had already been trying to control was rapidly spiralling into an overwhelming feeling of terror. I commented that I couldn't believe I had been arrested in front of everyone. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the officers shrug as I was marched

* Saul Kassin, 'Law enforcement experts on why police shouldn't be allowed to lie to suspects', *Time*, 16 December 2022.

across the car park.

“Sorry mate, but we’ve got a job to do.”

I would later discover their specific ‘job’ had been to intercept and arrest the subject of ongoing covert surveillance. That individual was at the very heart of a police investigation into serious, organised crime, which involved over fifty specialist officers from multiple police forces, alongside input from the UK’s intelligence services, which had resulted in a taskforce being assigned to monitor and detain the target. The investigation was codenamed ‘Operation Scuppered’, and the target was me.

Thankfully, as I was escorted towards a marked police car, I was none the wiser. The rear nearside passenger door was opened, and the harsh internal ceiling LED flicked on, bathing the dull, grey seats in a bright blue hue. The officers appeared to have parked directly next to a dark-coloured people carrier I didn’t recognise, which seemed odd, given that most of the car park was still empty.

“Just pop yourself in there.”

Had I been 5 foot 8 or less, I’d have probably managed. With my height, there was no chance I would fit, and I had little choice but to protest. Within seconds, one the officers slid the passenger seat forward, and I managed to lower myself inside, the handcuffs digging painfully into my wrists as I tried to fold myself into a comfortable position. I remember wondering whether they’d had any kind of briefing about my height or build—if so, why had they parked the car with just inches to spare next to another vehicle?

At this point, Sahib began frantically calling for someone else to come to his location—I could hear the panic in his voice on the radio clipped to my trousers. He was now working on his own; nobody was answering him. The radio was promptly turned off.

The second officer quickly slipped in beside me, sitting directly behind the driver’s seat. He nudged his glasses up his nose. Although well-spoken, his voice was quietly guttural, and it reminded me in some ways of Mr Bean. He sighed, nodding towards the front seats. “This is the problem working with the tallest man on the force”.

I wasn’t in the mood for humour. I became aware of voices and rustling directly behind me, and I could feel a cold breeze. I suddenly realised the car boot was open—police only kept traffic cones and paperwork in the boot. *Why was it open?* I listened carefully, finding I

could hear a small cluster of people murmuring. One man was evidently scrolling through my phone.

“He’s got Instagram, LinkedIn, Telegram, WhatsApp...”

Alarm bells started to ring loudly inside my head—I twisted my head around to see a group of people gathered in a semi-circle. My phone was being interrogated, *that’s why they wanted my PIN code*. Obtaining it by deception was an egregious abuse of power. To put it into perspective, it would be similar to the police knocking on your front door, and when you asked what they wanted, they just offered you a brief, free security check. “*Nothing to worry about sir, we just want to make sure your home is safe from the threats of the outside world.*” So, thinking it’ll be beneficial, you agree. But the moment you do, a horde of police officers appear from nowhere, shoving you aside as they begin opening your kitchen cupboards, going through your bank statements, looking in your photo albums, checking your medication, opening your post... their actions go so far beyond the boundaries that they had originally outlined that your invasion of privacy becomes *enormous*. And it was all based on a single lie.*

My brain was pounding inside my skull. Although I’d been arrested on suspicion of a firearms offence, it certainly wasn’t usual procedure to lie to a suspect, and then begin scrolling through the contents of his mobile phone in the confines of a car boot.

I immediately questioned the uniformed officer cramped in awkwardly next to me. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not really sure chap, we’ve just been asked to come and pick you up.”

Police feigning a lack of knowledge about the situation which *they* have chosen to instigate is one of the oldest tricks in the book. It’s designed to suppress the exchange of information and generate confusion. The officers knew where I worked, and when I would be on site. They had recognised me by sight, which meant they had either been given my photograph in advance, or they were connected by radio to a surveillance team, who would have positively identified me

* I would later contact Chris Sherwood, who acknowledged that obtaining a suspect’s PIN code this way was indeed a deliberately underhand tactic, often used by police officers when arresting drug dealers. Presumably the police only continue to do so as, so far, the lawfulness of the tactic has gone unchallenged in a court of law.

the moment I stepped outside the building. In turn, this meant there would have been an operational briefing and a risk assessment. The information would have been fed to them by someone higher up the chain of command, and it was obvious that every cop in the car park knew very well what was going on. If the officer wasn't sure what was going on, as he claimed, why had he arrested me?

I noticed it had fallen quiet at the rear of the car, and the voices had moved away—either the group realised their interrogation of my phone could be overheard, so moved away to continue doing so, or it had been part of a deliberate setup intended for me to overhear. Whichever it was, something was distinctly wrong, and panic began to creep in. As though sensing my unease, the officer began to make small talk.

“How long have you worked here?”

My response was abrupt. “Six months.”

“Oh. Do you enjoy it?”

This was another tactic; this one being employed to prevent me from listening in to what was going on outside the car. Even in the slight chance the officer was demonstrating genuine good will, in all honesty I couldn't have given two shits about whether or not I enjoyed work at that moment in time. I was probably never going to be coming back, having just been dragged out in handcuffs in front of everybody. Back when I was policing, this was a situation we tried to avoid at all costs, given the ramifications that could arise for the poor employee being arrested... It was an ideal tactic, however, if you valued the benefits of psychological disorientation. Any respect I'd worked hard to gain in two months had been lost in mere seconds.

Suddenly it occurred to me—the officers were on their way inside. *They never expected me to come outside at all.* They had been planning to come into the building without my knowledge, where they could take me by surprise and arrest me in front of everyone. I knew this would then give them a power to search my workplace.* I started to feel sick.

* Section 32(1) and (2) of PACE stipulate that if a person is arrested for an indictable offence, a Constable may search that person for anything which may be evidence relating to an offence, along with searching any premises which the person was inside when arrested, or was inside immediately prior to being arrested.

The officer continued with his aimless chatter, which just reminded me of the futility of my situation. I curtly asked him not to make small talk, explaining that I had no need to be entertained.

His response was almost apologetic. “I’m just trying to take your mind off things.”

I sat in the heavy silence, trying to work things out in my head as the handcuffs dug painfully into my wrists. Despite being arrested on suspicion of a firearms offence, I *hadn’t* been arrested by firearms officers and I *wasn’t* sitting in a firearms vehicle. This meant the police didn’t really think I possessed a firearm—if they did, they wouldn’t have taken the risk of sending unarmed officers. I hadn’t spotted any other marked police vehicles nearby, meaning the other men (and they *were* all men) had likely emerged from unmarked vehicles, which are usually few and far between in a police fleet. In addition, lying to me just to get my phone’s PIN code suggested I had been arrested as part of a larger operation, presumably one so significant that the end would justify the means. This wasn’t just a handful of uniformed officers; this was serious business. I began asking more questions.

“Who are those people?”

“I don’t know, mate. They’re from all over.” He nudged his glasses up his nose again.

“How long are we going to be?”

“I don’t know. Hopefully not long.”

I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know. He didn’t like answering questions and had obviously been told to ensure I knew nothing. I could feel the sensations of a panic attack starting to kick in. Having suffered with moderate claustrophobia for as long as I could remember, I knew I was getting into dangerous territory. Over the years, I had suffered two suspected heart attacks, and in addition I had fluctuating, but generally higher than normal, blood pressure. I could barely move, and the last thing I needed was to be repeatedly told that the people depriving me of my liberty had no idea what was going on, and had handed my unlocked phone to people whose identity they didn’t know.

Swallowing and trying to sound calm and reasonable, I spoke up again in as casual a tone as I could manage. “Is there any chance of switching the handcuffs around to the front, please? I’ve never been arrested before, I don’t pose any form of a threat to you, and I get claustrophobic.”

To my surprise, the officer agreed and called his behemoth of a colleague over. In less than 30 seconds I had been re-cuffed to the front, a small mercy for which I was grateful. A moment later, the second officer lowered himself into the driver's seat, shut his door, and we began to pull away. As we slipped out of the car park, I tried to look out of the windows, but the interior LED light was still shining brightly. I realised, too late, that it had been left turned on to prevent me from seeing any of the vehicles parked up nearby. It seemed only logical that I had been under surveillance.

As the car picked up speed, I watched the trees glide past as I looked towards the dark, murky horizon. I remember yearning to gulp down some fresh air, and realised the human soul craves most the things it cannot have. I suddenly coveted the freedom people were so indifferent to, the most precious, unrecognised possession of the simple souls trudging to work, grinding their way through another twelve-hour shift for another handful of mediocre pay.

I snapped back to reality. "Where are we going?"

"The Stock, mate." In typical police fashion, no further explanation was forthcoming. Medieval connotations aside, I had absolutely no idea where 'the Stock' was, and I could only assume it was a custody suite.

The officers attempted more inane small talk, which I didn't really engage with. They claimed to have no idea that I was a former police officer, which suggested either their briefing had been piss-poor, or they were *still* lying to me. Whichever one it was, it became clear that I wasn't going to get a straight answer from either of them. I was their prisoner, in every sense of the word.

“However low a man sinks
he never reaches the level of the police.”

Quentin Crisp

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AFTER ENTERING A new-looking industrial estate, we pulled up to some large steel gates. They creaked open and we turned right, the driver looping the car around to a secure prisoner bay. Knocking the car into neutral, the officer hopped out and pressed an intercom buzzer next to a large, steel door. After a very brief conversation, he came back to the car, dropping himself back into the driver's seat with a weighty *thump*.

"We've got to wait. There's someone in the bubble."

His colleague expressed surprise. "At half-past seven in the morning?"

"So they say." The silence fell like a blanket of snow. I decided to try asking what I was thinking.

"What's the bubble?"

The driver stayed silent, and the officer sitting next to me spoke up. "It's kind of like a holding area, that sort of thing."

The silence descended again, each minute passing agonisingly slowly. While the voice in my head was screaming in panic, the words of the officer next to me began to emerge through my swirling brain fog. He was saying something about buying a new car. I tried tuning him in but failed, and instead found myself becoming acutely aware of the cold, damp air creeping in now the engine was off. My warm, moist breath began to cause condensation on the interior of the window, and in a daze, I watched closely as the droplets formed.

Five or so minutes later, the steel door opened, and someone beckoned. I was escorted inside, where we duly passed through 'the bubble', which turned out to be a large, American-style fish tank of a holding room with a glass wall and a long wooden bench running along one side. I entered the custody suite, which was smaller than I had anticipated.

Before I could go any further, I found myself intercepted by a stern, thin, matronly-looking woman, dressed in a black business-style outfit with black tights and black shoes. The bright red lanyard around

her neck read ‘VISITOR’ but her ID card was facing her chest (another tactic to prevent the suspect from piecing together the situation) and she introduced herself curtly, avoiding making eye contact as she spoke to me.

“Hi, I’m Liz and I’ll be part of the interview team today.”

My brain was buzzing with questions. *Liz who? What rank?* *Where are you from?* I would discover in due course that she was Detective Elizabeth Ainsworth of the Regional Special Operations Unit, the RSOU, one of ten Regional Organised Crime Units located around England and Wales. She was also the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) for Operation Scuppered. I forced a smile and told her it was nice to meet her. In a barely perceptible motion, her lip curled upwards as though I had made a pass at her. Then, instead of being taken up to the normal custody desks, I was twisted to the right and promptly taken into a small, cluttered back office. As I recall, nobody gave the officers instructions to do this, and I concluded they had been provided instructions in advance.

I glanced around the office, looking at the battered metal shelving unit behind me. It was full of donated books for use by detainees—many seemed to be suitable only for children or, oddly, Ukrainians. A pair of crutches had been tossed into the void between the shelves and the wall, and various items were strewn haphazardly everywhere. A stool was buried under a mountain of old folders and paperwork.

A custody Sergeant sat behind the cheap office desk, and I immediately began to wonder if this process was PACE-compliant, and whether such treatment was reserved purely for ‘special’ detainees such as myself. My mind flashed back through each stage that had occurred in sequence. It seemed that, on paper, the police wished to portray me as a high-level threat, but the way I was being handled suggested something quite different. The police train for situational awareness, using the example that shepherding a suspect for domestic violence into the kitchen area to be arrested is to be avoided at all costs, given the number of sharp implements to hand that can be used to cause physical injury. My eyes travelled over the pens, cables, and multitude of other items easily within my grasp that were normally kept, with good cause, out of the reach of regular detainees. So, either I was high-risk, hence the special treatment, or I wasn’t high-risk, which didn’t really justify the use of a secluded back office. I also

realised that as it didn't form part of the 'normal' custody suite, it probably didn't contain any of the usual CCTV cameras or audio microphones. Had this been deliberate?

The officer who arrested me, repeating the wording he used to me a short time ago, explained to the Sergeant that I had been arrested on suspicion of possession of a section 1 firearm, following execution of a warrant at my home address. The very heavy insinuation was that a gun (or guns) had been found at my home address following a police search. Little did I know, even while I stood there, the police had still not searched my address. DC Ainsworth would have been well aware of this fact but made no moves to correct the Sergeant about such an important point.

None the wiser, however, I answered the Sergeant's questions politely and honestly, also explaining that I had recently been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and that I suffered with long-standing anxiety and depression. I gave him the details of my daily anti-depressants, but I had no idea whether he actually noted any of it down. Upon hearing me mention ASD, Detective Ainsworth frowned, picked up her mobile phone and clipboard, and hurriedly left the room.

As the process continued, I leaned back against the wall and experimentally slipped my hands into my pockets to see how the arresting officers would react. To my surprise, it was almost instantaneous.

"Just keep your hands out of your pockets for me, chap."

One point for situational awareness, although this begged the question as to why I had not been searched, or at least patted down, prior to being placed in the back of the car.

The custody Sergeant explained that I was being held 'incommunicado', meaning my normal legal rights (to have someone informed of my presence in custody) were suspended. He gave no explanation for the decision, nor did he tell me who had authorised it. As far as I was aware, this status only applied to people who had been arrested under terrorism legislation—that wasn't me, so why was it being authorised? The Sergeant explained that in due course, once the status no longer applied, I would be able to have someone notified that I was in custody. Little did I know, the police would never tell me when, or if, the status had been lifted; I was not given the opportunity to notify anyone during the 15 hours I would spend in custody.

The officers then stepped in to search me and, I was surprised to find, confiscated my belt but allowed me to keep my shoelaces. Something was *definitely* amiss here. Procedurally, I had been arrested for a firearms offence which held a minimum custodial term of several years' imprisonment. That alone would have been an immense shock to anybody. In addition, I had explained my diagnosis of long-standing anxiety and depression and had detailed how I took prescription anti-depressants. Yet I had been allowed to keep my shoelaces, along with the sturdy elasticated cord which remained visible in the hem of my jacket. This was not just the decision of the arresting officer; it was ratified by the custody Sergeant. Somewhere in the back of my mind, the alarm bells rang even louder.

I was given a cup of tea and taken to my cell, which was located at the far end of the Stock's west wing. I was hurriedly provided two blankets before being locked inside. Colour psychology plays a big part in the criminal justice system, and cells are often painted a light, pastel green; mine here was no different. This is quite deliberate, because in much the same way that the colour red is psychologically associated with driving hunger (think meat: McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut) scientific experiments have found that green has positive connotations with promoting calm, serenity, and wellbeing (think nature: Holland & Barrett, The Body Shop, Tropicana).

The cell measured approximately four metres in depth by three-and-a-half metres in width, and a concrete bunk was an integral part of the structure, located to the left-hand side. A tiny metal toilet sat directly next to the door, facing the large, corner-mounted CCTV camera. Although suspects are informed that images are pixelated for privacy, the angling of the toilet and surveillance camera provided a strange juxtaposition. Again, the placement is deliberate—it is designed to cover every inch of the cell, whilst subtly reminding you that, even at your most vulnerable, you are being watched. Ergo, the majority of suspects who are *not* acquainted with the custody experience will therefore likely refrain from sitting on a tiny, metal, piss-splattered toilet situated directly in front of a hulking CCTV camera, meaning they will be more agreeable with their interviewers, simply because they wish to expedite the process and work towards their release. If it's simple, it works. I silently reminded myself that, no matter my history, these people were *not* my friends.

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I took three steps over to the bunk, noting that someone had stuck two curled pubic hairs to the far wall. The paint looked relatively fresh, but the name ‘EMMA’ was still visible scratched into the concrete underneath the window. There were five rows of seven individual glass squares, each one crafted to a smooth centre point so no part of the outside world could be seen. Thirty-five tiny windows, each with four sides, totalling one hundred and forty sides altogether.

I lay back on the bunk, my eyes squinting directly into the two fluorescent bulbs shining brightly overhead. Like others diagnosed with ASD, I had issues with light sensitivity—depending on the frequency of the light, it could trigger excruciating migraines. Although I hadn’t suffered with them for a couple of years (since I developed an awareness of the cause) I still avoided harsh light wherever possible, and even slept at night with an eye mask on. I remember how, when a migraine was starting, my focus would narrow to a pinpoint speck before my vision ‘cracked’ like a broken pane of glass. Flashing black and white chequers and lightning bolts would wreak havoc with my eyesight, my head reeling as though it had been split in two with an axe.

I turned away from the light, facing the wall. I realised how torturous this experience was for someone neurodivergent. In all my years of life so far, I had never *once* stopped to consider how I spent almost every waking moment learning something. Often through the process of watching, reading, or listening, I would constantly absorb information like a sponge. I would gather items about my current interest as though I were a farmer harvesting crops that would rot if I didn’t act fast enough. Now I was locked in a cell with four green walls, a black floor, and a blanket for company. I could be locked in here for up to 24 hours, maybe even longer. Deep down, I wanted to scream.

I desperately tried to think of things that *weren’t* panic-inducing, failing miserably. Unhelpfully, I remembered reading the book *Games People Play* by Eric Berne. The opening chapter described how there was a noted correlation discovered between social deprivation and a rise in mental disturbances, with Berne giving examples of prisoners kept in isolation. He also wrote keenly about something scientists of the day referred to as “stimulus-hunger”. In essence, Berne noted that no matter the form of social intercourse, *any* form, even punishment, had a distinct biological advantage over no form at all. In context, I

suspected that in my journey ahead, the ‘everyday’ custody experience, would be a heck of a lot worse for someone with autism.

Large red stencilled letters loomed directly above my head, urging me that now was the time to confess to any other crimes I may have committed. *Other crimes?* What if I hadn’t committed any crimes at all? There was nothing like the familiar feeling of being presumed guilty until proven innocent. The Crimestoppers logo felt like an eye. I turned away from it all, and my mind began to wander. Would I ever see Anna again? What about our dogs? They were both elderly and followed me everywhere; they stuck to me like glue. Some innate knowledge told me the police had been biding their time for this moment, and now they had me locked up, they would be doing everything within their power to pin something on me.

I imagined a whole team of people scouring through my WhatsApp messages, my Instagram friends, all of my Amazon purchases, every email I had ever sent and received... They wouldn’t stop until they got *something*—whoever was in charge was never going to permit the situation where officers from a Regional Organised Crime Unit were either sent on a wild goose chase, or returned from such an oversized operation empty-handed. Being charged and remanded could take months off my life, and if I was sentenced for any offences on top, both of my dogs could be dead before I would see them again. They would never know where, or why, I had left them. The cruelty of the thought caused me incredible sadness, and blinking back tears, I tried to block the thoughts out.

I also tried not to think about what might be happening at home, forcing my brain to slow down, as if I were meditating. Anna was smart and resilient, and she had witnessed almost as much wrongdoing within the police service as I had. She knew what they were capable of, and as there was no way for me to reach out, to either help her or reassure her, I began trying to block out the thoughts. Compartmentalisation was an important skill—when in the enemy’s hands, if you allowed your mind to roam, you would begin to suffer. Again, the isolation is a psychological ploy that serves an additional purpose—whilst there are often legitimate investigative, judicial, or even safety reasons for placing people in cells, in other, less common circumstances you will simply be locked up to allow you to ‘cool off’ or to ‘give you some time’—arrests for being drunk and disorderly are

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a prime example. It's a manipulative process designed to wear you down, to wither and dull you back into becoming a cooperative member of society. As Berne had written in his book, humans are social creatures, and the process of locking someone away intentionally isolates and starves them of social interaction and communication.

I turned to the wall, blanked my mind again, and closed my eyes. No matter what they hoped, I wasn't intending to beg for my freedom.

“The abiding memory of those who investigated me
is of incompetence and stupidity.”

Graham Satchwell
An Inspector Recalls

53

“EY UP, MATE. We just need to do your fingerprints and photograph.”

I opened my eyes. The cell door was open, and a short, friendly-looking male detention officer stood facing me. I stood up and followed him down the corridor of the west wing, heading back to the custody suite. I was ushered into a small room next to the bubble, which was equipped with the standard custody fare—a ‘livescan’ fingerprint machine, a photo booth, and a fridge for storing DNA samples.

As the officer adjusted his equipment to snap my picture, I could see my face reflected in the darkness of the lens. I had bags under my eyes, and although the officers instruct you to remain neutral, I remembered wondering how best to hold my expression so as to avoid looking completely devoid of emotion. The traditional ‘mugshot’ carries a lot of weight—anyone who’s ever read a newspaper article accompanied by a photograph of an individual staring soullessly into the camera lens will understand that it is instinctive for readers to determine whether the face ‘fits’ the crime of which the owner has been accused. Whilst I understood the necessity to do so, showing no emotion only risked alienating you further.

In addition, I considered the pain Anna would have to endure if my mugshot were ever to be published. I knew following my police dismissal that once such an image is released into the wilderness of the internet, its spread can never be controlled. Considering it might be the last photograph of me that she saw for a very long time, I opted for a slight, gentle smile, hoping that it would reassure her that I had been relaxed during the process, rather than increasingly frightened, and it would also perhaps ease any hostile or accusatory comments she might suffer.

In short order, my DNA had been taken and my fingerprints stored and sent off for automated forensic comparison against outstanding crimes. The detention officer returned me to my cell with a Frosties cereal bar. I took one bite and felt sick, so I lay down and turned back to face the wall as the door slammed home.

“The less you know, the more susceptible you are to manipulation via your ignorance. That’s what all ‘leaders’ do. It’s how they try to make themselves seem necessary—they’re going to protect you from some vague menace, and the vaguer the menace, the more ignorant you have to be to fall for their line. They don’t want you to have facts at your command, or to know how to think.”

Michael Hoy

54

“YOUR SOLICITOR IS here.”

I opened my eyes. With nothing else to do, I had clearly dozed off again. Anna had always been jealous of my ability to sleep almost anywhere and, being grateful that I had been able to pass the time in this manner, I stood up and stretched, my eyes meeting a female detention officer, who had long dark hair and equally long legs. Following her from my cell, I was escorted back to the custody desk, where Detective Ainsworth waited for me, the clipboard glued to her arms. With a pursed smile, she gestured me down a side corridor containing several interview rooms. I was ushered to the last room on the left, where I came face-to-face with a smart, suited, and well-groomed man, who promptly stood up and offered me his hand. His beard was immaculate.

“I’m Sani, the duty solicitor, nice to meet you.”

We sat down and Sani shut the door before quickly tightening his lips. He returned to the desk and slid some paperwork towards me. I immediately noticed that, despite the ambient temperature elsewhere in the custody suite consistently hovering between cold and moderate, the interview room was sweltering. Again, this is an old, but usually quite deliberate, tactic, done to encourage suspects to admit things faster so they can leave the room for a glass of water back in the cool confines of their concrete cell. It seemed 1970s policing was still alive and kicking.

“The officers have given me a disclosure... it might be easier for you to read.”

I picked the paperwork up and began to digest how the police had received ‘information’ in late 2022 from “work colleagues” who believed I was acting irrationally... My mind flashed straight back to Gary Lancaster, my dishonest, cocksure ex-manager who had maliciously thrown the fabricated gross misconduct allegations at me.

The document went on, alleging I was “amassing a collection of whips”* and had apparently expressed an ‘interest’ in obtaining a shotgun licence.† Although the disclosure did not explicitly say so, the inference the police were choosing to draw was that I might go berserk—either armed with a handful of whips, or a shotgun that I didn’t have. Either way, I figured it wouldn’t amount to much of a rampage. I had never read such absolute rubbish, and I shook my head in disbelief, wondering where such nonsense had come from. I was reminded of a conversation with a former colleague who had been a Detective Inspector with Special Branch (ironically, part of the RSOU), where he jovially reminisced about the occasions they used to phone in anonymous tips themselves to get the ball rolling on an investigation.

The next paragraph detailed how, following receipt of that tip-off, the police had covertly monitored my eBay and Amazon purchases. I was astounded at this, finding it incredible that a single, malicious report to Crimestoppers was all it took to justify snooping on someone’s financial transactions. The police claimed that several ‘concerning’ items had been ordered, but they had not provided any details other than a vague mention of a ‘telescopic sight’, which the document claimed ‘would allow shooting over longer distances’.

There were several flaws with this amalgamation of hogwash. First, I had never expressed any interest in shotguns whatsoever, irrespective of whether they would be used for shooting pheasants or clay pigeons. The police would *know* that I had never applied for a shotgun licence, as applications have to be submitted to your local police force. Therefore, I knew there would be no evidence or intelligence to support me trying to acquire a shotgun, legally or not, as I had never made any moves to do so. Second, if I had no shotgun and there was no evidence that I intended to obtain one, how could I shoot anything? Third, if I *did* have a shotgun (which I didn’t), any police officer worth their salt would be fully aware that shotguns are generally regarded as short-range weapons. Adding a telescopic sight to a shotgun would be like adding a silencer to a water pistol—it would be a pointless endeavour. Finally, the wording was misleading, and I suspected this was intentional. A telescopic sight does not ‘allow’

* Collecting whips is legal.

† Applying for a shotgun licence is... also legal. Sigh.

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shooting over longer distances, the distance over which a projectile can travel remains entirely dependent upon the workings of the gun which it is fired from; the addition of a sight merely renders the weapon's operator more precise with their aiming. Basic physics.

What absolute crap.

Sani explained his concerns to me in quite simple terms. “The first thing—this is being dealt with by the RSOU. It *appears* to be some kind of counter-terrorist operation, so everything they do will be prim and proper.”

I found his observation odd, as so far, *nobody* had mentioned terrorism. As far as I was aware, I was still being held incommunicado, which most likely related to terrorism, but I hadn't been arrested for terrorism offences. It seemed like the police were trying to ensure my arrest ticked several boxes—whether this was a calculating way to grant them additional legal powers, or whether it was just for their own later glory, remained to be seen. Regardless, at the time, neither Sani nor I had any real idea that we would actually experience the exact opposite of professionalism—the lies had already begun and would soon be piled on thick and fast.

I was vaguely aware of the RSOU, having actually applied to join their undercover unit back in 2013, although I had not known that there were ten of these Regional Organised Crime Units spread across England and Wales. Each unit was made up of officers seconded from several local police forces, and each ROCU had replaced the old style ‘Regional Crime Squads’. Many tales—published and otherwise—exist about their rampant corruption, seemingly more prevalent the further south you travelled.*

Sani continued. “Second thing—it’s clear they’ve got some sort of narrative with you. I get the feeling they’re trying to make things fit that narrative.”

This comment worried me. I had a comprehensive understanding of the typical manner in which police conducted their investigations. While officers are taught the importance of maintaining an impartial mindset, the reality, as I had witnessed during the investigation into Cooper’s complaint, is starkly different. Cops often displayed tunnel vision, particularly when dealing with higher priority cases. The more

* I highly recommend the book *Bent Coppers* by Graeme McLagan.

elevated you were up the police ‘wanted’ list, the more determined the force became to ensure that the evidence they ‘found’ aligned with the accusations they were making. This behaviour is a common complaint among career criminals and professional gangsters, as often evidenced in their autobiographies.

To that end, I already knew that the police service, organisationally speaking, holds grudges. It is hard to explain how a behemoth of a public service can do this, but my mind again recalled Mark Daly, the undercover BBC journalist who filmed covert footage of police recruits being brazenly racist during their initial training in 2003.* Senior officers, having been tipped off about the possibility of Daly filming a documentary, gave orders for him to be arrested on suspicion of obtaining a pecuniary advantage, a ridiculous accusation given the weight of the public interest in the actions he had documented. I personally suspected the police had used the arrest as leverage in a legal tit-for-tat, in an attempt to justify their search for the incriminating footage Daly had filmed.

I snapped back to the present again, finding Sani was asking me a question. “Are they going to find any guns in your house?”

I explained that yes, I owned three typical air rifles which I didn’t really use (a .22, a .177 and I couldn’t even remember what the third one was), and a handful of self-contained, plastic paintball markers. I did not, however, own any *actual* guns—no shotguns, semi-automatics, revolvers, or even black powder rifles. Absolutely nothing of the sort.

“Have you done anything *to* the guns?”

I informed Sani that I had not done anything to the air rifles, two of which were second-hand, and the third purchased from a now-closed gun shop in Yorkshire. As far as I was concerned, they were all legitimate and quite legal, and in addition, had been given a once-over by my ex-colleagues in the police. As for the paintball markers, I owned a handful which had not been modified, but two which had. Regarding the modified ones, I explained that I had inadvertently purchased the underpowered 11-joule versions, and upon finding this out, had replaced the internal valve mechanisms with standalone valves from the 16-joule version. This was all above board, and kept everything

* Shortly before I started my police training (see chapter 16)—it speaks volumes that his arrest is still relevant two decades down the line.

within the legal power limits, although admittedly I had not tested the result to any scientific standard as I didn't own a chronograph. But all my original purchases could be proved, and I considered it unlikely* that anything would surpass the legal power limits.

Sani told me that the police would no doubt seize anything that looked remotely like a gun, and my choices were either to cooperate fully with the interviewers, or to go 'no comment', with the latter choice drawing an obvious risk of inference at court.

Whilst I fully understood that fiddling around and modifying the internal workings of a paintball marker was probably frowned upon by most people (particularly if those modifications resulted in the *risk* of the marker exceeding applicable power limits), I was quite happy to explain the circumstances—not, I stress, in any effort to invoke a defence against the accusation, for which I understand there is none anyway, but merely in the hope the officers would see me as a real human being who enjoyed learning (in an autistic and hyper-focused way), and who had kindness and compassion. I was *not* the unstable, whip-wielding maniac they had either been led to believe or were now hoping to paint me as. I wondered how many people the RSOU had arrested who routinely fed a semi-tame field mouse, helped toads across the road, bought houses for local hedgehogs, and fed and photographed members of the neighbourhood's squirrel and fox population.

Our consultation being complete, the officers entered the room, and I found myself greeting a smiling blonde woman with a slightly ruddy complexion, wearing a purple and black dress. She identified herself as Detective Sam Bennett. She was accompanied by an older gentleman who had both the appearance and demeanour of a grandfather suffering with mild senility. He was wearing a cheap, nondescript shirt and trouser combination, and more importantly, seemed to periodically forget what he was supposed to be doing. He also suffered with a peculiar tic—every few minutes he would suddenly screw his nose up and blink his eyes widely as though he'd

* Even the process of testing is imprecise, as the power output is dependent on the pressure of the CO₂ in the cartridges, which itself is determined by the ambient temperature. And that's without taking into account the weight and fit of the projectile, the length of the barrel... there are many variables.

just farted himself awake. He introduced himself as Detective Alan O'Connor.

Both officers were on secondment to the RSOU. Both held lined A4 notepads, and in DC Bennett's case, a printed 'crib sheet' of standard interview questions. We commenced the interview, and DC O'Connor went to great lengths to explain the caution to me. The first tick in the box for rigid formalities as Sani had suggested; prim and proper.

We got down to business and the Detectives showed immediate interest in my air rifles and paintball markers, something I thought strange, considering that their basis for this entire debacle was the allegation I was "amassing a collection of whips" and considering applying for a shotgun licence. However, they took no interest whatsoever in asking about whips or shotguns, which gave me a solid indication of *exactly* how much they cared about the original tip-off—they didn't, obviously considering it a means to an end.

So, I dutifully explained which paintball markers I owned, giving makes and model numbers, along with details of which ones had replacement parts fitted and why.

In total, the interview took almost two hours, as DC Bennett repeatedly wrote down the wrong information. Much to my frustration, she seemed unable to follow the sequence of events I provided, and incorrectly noted down several model numbers, getting muddled up in the process. Perhaps it was just the neurodivergent versus the neurotypical, but being firmly in the former camp, I was struggling to comprehend quite why keeping track of my precise and accurate explanations was so difficult for them. I could only imagine how they would struggle in a more complex interview... God help you if you were arrested on suspicion of murder.

I was then asked to tell the Detectives about every digital device I owned, along with any related usernames and passwords. They didn't explain the legal grounds under which they were asking, or explain what they intended to do with the devices once they could access them. Regardless, to give an idea of how difficult this task can be, pick up a notepad and try to write down your Windows or Apple logon passwords, then add your Microsoft or Apple account details, along with Spotify, Amazon, Etsy, eBay, Pinterest and Hotmail usernames and passwords. Be aware that any mistake you make in this process of

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recollection, or any password that you cannot remember, will be frowned upon with great suspicion as though you are trying to hide the cure for cancer.

In my usual fashion, I just answered the questions without thinking. The Detectives continued to scribble away, and then spontaneously asked me whether I owned a 3D printer. Did they seriously think I was printing and selling home-made guns on the black market?

For fuck's sake. "No."

Eventually, the Detectives ended the interview and left the room, presumably to update DC Ainsworth, who spent most of her time hovering around the custody desk with an air of self-importance. I had met people like her before; I suspected she was enjoying her VIP status amongst the 'pond life', as ground-level, uniformed officers were sometimes derisively nicknamed.

Sani frowned. He seemed puzzled, and remarked that, although both officers were reasonably pleasant, neither seemed to be the sharpest tool in the shed. He attributed this to the fact they were part of a large team, small groups of whom were operating in 'information silos' and were thus intentionally devoid of information obtained from elsewhere. This didn't sound like a common-sense approach to investigating, but I kept my views to myself.

I was returned to my cell, where, with nothing else to do, I decided to walk around in small circles to keep physically active. I quickly found this wasn't possible due to the cell layout, something I suspect was intentional in the design. It was less than four paces for me to walk from the door to the back wall, and so instead I settled for doing some gentle stretches, before lying down on the bunk, pulling the blanket up and sorely wishing I was back at home. I couldn't believe how close I had finally been to seeing the sun on the horizon, only to find my future plunged into darkness once again.

“What must be attacked, uprooted and destroyed [...] is, generally, the tendency to place legalisms above the interests of society, and, individually, the tendency among investigators to place their interpretation of the law above the understood goals of justice.”

Martin Cruz Smith
Gorky Park

55

MY CELL DOOR opened to a request for a second interview, where we went around in a few circles. Detectives Bennett and O'Connor continued asking similar questions, and I carried on answering calmly and politely. There was some minor variation, as after recapping on the paintball marker makes and models, they asked me questions about my eBay and Amazon activity. DC O'Connor now held a printed list in front of him, which appeared to be an *extremely* selective log of my eBay purchases; it looked very much like the bottom of the barrel was being scraped.

Anyone who has ever used eBay will know about the basics of keyword searching. Sellers, in a bid to attract as many buyers as possible, will use the maximum number of keywords permitted within each auction or listing title. This means that the chances of the seller's item appearing in search results which use similar or linked terminology will increase dramatically. For example, a simple dog blanket might be listed as 'Dog cat bed fleece blanket throw shawl, warm winter cozy wool-style natural pet bed', ensuring that anyone who searches for 'dog fleece', 'natural cat throw' or 'pet bed' will receive a link to the exact same listing. It was a simple method to increase an auction's exposure to more prospective buyers.

Detective O'Connor stated that, following receipt of the tip-off, some "concerns" had come to light following items I had ordered. I could see that on his printout, someone had used a yellow highlighter to isolate the keywords which were (apparently) of such a concern that they indicated a serious crime or national security issue. The fact that some of the keywords bore very little resemblance to what had been physically purchased didn't seem to matter, and I strongly suspected that even if the investigators had done their job properly, by viewing the listings and/or photographs the sellers had uploaded, they would still have intentionally withheld that information as it didn't fit their agenda. In efforts to bolster their own preconceptions, the police had started down a road and had no intention of turning

back. Sani's words echoed in my head: *It's clear they've got a narrative with you. They seem to be trying to make things fit that narrative.*

For example, I had recently purchased a miniature 1:16 scale keyring model of a Pietro Beretta handgun. It was smaller than my little finger and came with a small chain and a keyring attached to it. Ironically, I actually contacted the seller prior to purchase to determine whether they had experienced any shipping issues to the UK; I described our customs authorities as being ridiculously over-zealous when it came to things they perceived as 'weapons', having read comments on one website about children's plastic water pistols being returned to the sender because customs officials considered them to be 'firearms'. In perfect proof of this point, the keywords 'gun' and 'pistol' had been highlighted in yellow on DC O'Connor's printout, but the words 'miniature' and 'keyring' had not.

Further down the same list was an eBay listing from which I had purchased a wooden, flame-burnt, magic wand (yes, really—just like in Harry Potter) and the keywords 'wooden' and 'stick' were highlighted, yet other words in the listing were not.

Another example involved a bag of 500 steel ball bearings. These were not precision manufactured, and I had purchased them in bulk from a supplier as doing so was cheaper than buying precision bearings. I had stored these (along with a smaller bag of 100 biodegradable balls made of mud) in a box with a collection of catapults, following one of my spontaneous interests in more primitive hunting techniques. My YouTube history would show the interest was genuine, however on DC O'Connor's printout, the keyword 'ammunition' had been highlighted in the same, bright yellow ink.

So, following my purchases of a keyring, a magic wand, and some cheap ball-bearings, the RSOU officers had crafted a list which read: *gun, pistol, ammunition, wooden stick.*

The intentional selection of information to support a one-sided agenda is yet another police tactic which is particularly unfair and underhand, as it forces the suspect to explain something that should have been blindingly obvious in the first place. I strongly suspected that when the initial search warrant had been sought from the court, the judge would have been told, with measured reassurances, that an anonymous tip-off had been received about me being "irrational", and I was found to have conducted searches on eBay and Amazon, where

I had purchased a “gun” and “ammunition”. Consequently, with a bit of selective creativity, a fairly dramatic situation can be constructed from fresh air. Add in some hypothetical suggestions (“well, ball bearings *can* be used as shrapnel in bombs, your worship”) and you’re almost guaranteed a warrant. Based on what I had bought, perhaps the commanding officers at the RSOU who had instigated this whole debacle expected me to start conjuring balls of fire at unsuspecting members of the public as though I were some kind of Hogwarts reject or one-man (or should that be ‘one-wizard’?) revolt against the world.

One of the next things the Detectives expressed interest in was a replacement valve I had ordered for one of the paintball markers I owned. Once again, I found myself re-explaining that I had replaced a number of parts, including the valves, as the pistols had been sold to me as the 11-joule variant. I was interested in the most effective legal functionality I could achieve from the markers, and I also explained that I had purchased a replacement cylinder for the ammunition, as the factory-supplied one was inconsistently sized, and paintballs simply fell out, rolling down the barrel and out of the marker. For all intents and purposes, this rendered it completely and utterly useless. I felt like I was trying to explain the difference between purchasing a car with a 3-litre engine and four-wheel drive, versus an old-school Fiat 500 with no power steering.

I pointed out that although I was aware the markers could be pushed well beyond the legal 16-joule power limit, I understood this could only be achieved by drilling out sections and inserting higher capacity parts, alongside using larger gas canisters which had much greater pressure than could be found in a normal 12-gram CO₂ cartridge. I had no interest in doing this and had neither researched it nor bought the parts for doing so. The Detectives seemed completely baffled by the detail in my explanation, which made me wonder why they had been sent to interview me in the first place.

Growing impatient with my explanations, DC O’Connor interrupted, asking: “What would happen if you shot *me* with it?”

Sani immediately objected to this question and instructed me not to answer it. He, like me, recognised the inappropriateness of the question: the premise was hypothetical, and I wasn’t accused of having even attempted to shoot any living creature with a paintball.

I imagine my expression conveyed my incredulity, as I briefly responded, “I’ve never shot anyone with one. How would I know?”

Abruptly switching tactics once again, the officers moved away from the paintball markers and began asking me whether I had ever “kept anything” from my time serving in the police.

“Pardon?”

It was time... The RSOU obviously hadn’t got what they wanted (presumably an *actual* shotgun) and so the witch hunt was beginning. I was not under arrest on suspicion of any theft, yet here I was, detained in a stifling hot interview room with two specialist Detectives from one of the country’s ten Regional Organised Crime Units, who were asking me questions which I didn’t have to answer. Except if I *didn’t* answer them, they could use my silence to make me look guilty. It was a paradoxical problem; they were forcing me to sit on a powder keg which they could blow up at any point.

Except for my old warrant card (which nobody ever asked me for, and which I had snapped in half), I had not. They pointedly referred back to DC O’Connor’s selective list of eBay transactions, remarking that some time ago, I had sold a “black tactical police-style jacket”. In continued demonstration of their convenient interpretations, the keywords ‘police’ and ‘jacket’ were highlighted in yellow, but the words ‘tactical’ and ‘style’ were not. I sighed, wondering how many of these stitch-ups I would have to endure. Becoming frustrated, I explained that I worked within the security profession and, due to the hostilities I had continually encountered regarding my dismissal from the police, I had previously considered working as a self-employed contractor. I had bought, and then sold on, a couple of different black jackets. It had not been issued to me by the police and was therefore *not* a police jacket. There was little more for me to say.

This did not seem to provoke a satisfactory response. In a further attempt at suggesting I had misappropriated things from my policing career, DC Bennett remarked that the search team had found some handcuffs in my house. I replied that yes, I had a collection of antique policing equipment, which included a set of 1960s Hiatt handcuffs, a pair of South Korean Yuil thumb-cuffs, and a set of antique Russian handcuffs. They were all private purchases which, again, were not illegal to own—the term he didn’t appear to be familiar with was *memorabilia*. I even had a number of books on Victorian-era policing,

including one specifically about historic police equipment which had been signed by the author at my request. Perhaps if they couldn't screw me as the reincarnation of Raul Moat, they'd try charging me as Jack the Ripper.

Towards the end of the interview, Detective O'Connor acknowledged that it was "very hot" in the room, and he felt it appropriate—given the stifling temperature—for me to take a break. The officers confirmed they would be interviewing me again in due course, but in the meantime, they expressed concerns for my welfare, reminding me that it was important to eat and drink whilst in custody. So, they promised to bring me some food and a cup of coffee.

I shook hands with Sani who promised to return after he had nipped home for some dinner and made amends with his wife, and I was escorted back to my cell once again. Minutes later, the hatch opened, and I was handed a steaming hot chicken-and-mushroom-flavour Pot Noodle, a pot of jellied fruit, and a cup of hot coffee by DC O'Connor. He promptly wandered off, leaving the cell hatch wide open. I immediately examined the little of the exterior that I could see, to determine whether there was a ligature point accessible. I am fairly confident that, had I made a lasso out of my shoelaces, I could have latched onto one, but I decided to hold off for the time being. For once, I was controlling my desperation.

I took the 'meal' over to the bunk. Things had obviously changed in the last few years, as the standard plastic cutlery had been replaced with a single rectangle of card. I frowned at the instructions—it seemed I was supposed to fold it in half and use it, in a rather primitive manner, to 'scoop' food into my mouth. This was just another element of the whole degrading experience. The Pot Noodle was too hot to eat, and so I placed it on the concrete floor to cool down while I lay back on the bunk.

Only minutes later the cell door opened, and a female detention officer stood in the frame. Smiling, she told me that the officers wanted to take my fingerprints and photograph. Puzzled by this, I frowned.

"But they've already been done."

She ignored my remark and gestured. "They're just down here."

Bewildered, I left my food and drink and found myself ushered back to the same sweltering interview room I had left only minutes earlier, the very same place I was supposed to be having a break from.

Inside stood two men in plain clothes—the first was fairly stocky with partial facial stubble and a shaved head, wearing blue jeans and a grey t-shirt with a motif on the front, and the second was tall and slim, with dark hair, a thin, clean-shaven face, and a black polo shirt. Like DC O'Connor, both seemed to suffer with peculiar ties. Officer Jeans was extremely pleasant and spoke with a northern accent, which I placed as being slightly Geordie. Bizarrely, he was prone to muttering “thanks Rich” after every interaction and movement, which was very odd given that Rich is not, and has never been, my name. Continuing the same refusal to give any details away, Officer Jeans claimed they had absolutely ‘no idea’ what the job was; they had simply been told to come and photograph and fingerprint me. Curiously, Officer Jeans announced that he had travelled nearly 100 miles for the task. Meanwhile, Officer Polo was prone to making periodic humming noises as he blew air through his nose. He inspected everything very closely, and often referred to parts of the fingers, thumb, and hand by their scientific names. Officer Polo was introduced by Officer Jeans as a fingerprint specialist.

The pair puzzled me, and Officer Jeans pulled a Nikon DSLR from a large black canvas holdall. “Right then Rich, let’s get some photographs of you.”

Before I moved anywhere, I asked what the purpose of this process was.

“We’re here to take your fingerprints and photographs... thanks Rich.”

“But I’ve already had those done.”

He chuckled nervously. “No, they will have been livescan.”

I wasn’t an idiot; I was fully aware that livescan recorded my fingerprints as well as matching them to outstanding cases or other records—it was faster and more accurate than the old ink-block method. As with the arresting officers, I wasn’t entirely sure this pair had been informed that I was an ex-cop, and whilst I could use this to my advantage, I certainly wasn’t going to be fobbed off so easily.

“My prints and photograph have been done, there’s a special room for that. We’re in an interview room and I’m concerned about where this process sits within PACE. Anyway, is there a reason why we’re doing this *after* my solicitor has left?”

My mention of PACE momentarily stumped Officer Jeans, and

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Officer Polo quickly hummed and blew air through his nose, offering no response. Officer Jeans chuckled again, sounding unsure of himself.

“Well, it’s not like your solicitor can object to it, Rich.”

“But where will the photographs be sent?”

“To the police database... thanks Rich.” The pair were intentionally leading me round in circles, and treating me like I was stupid was a surefire way to get my back up.

“My photograph has already been taken for the police database, so which database are you talking about? This force have their own database of custody images, and my photographs were taken for storage on there earlier. So which database do you mean?”

Having been put on the spot, Officer Jeans awkwardly fiddled with his camera and Officer Polo hummed and blew air through his nose again. “Just, you know... The police database, Rich. It should only take about two hours.”

My mind reeled. *Two hours?*! The exchange continued and I didn’t succeed in getting any straight answers out of either of them. I could either refuse (and no doubt end up fighting with everyone), or go along with it. I decided to give up and followed Officer Jeans, who had evidently not thought through his one task in advance, and thus had nowhere suitable to photograph me.

After some wandering around, we eventually returned to my cell, where I was instructed to stand up against the wall, which made me feel a little bit like I was about to be executed. Officer Jeans raised the camera and explained that he would take photographs both close-up and at a distance, and he would take 360-degree shots of me, including my ears and the back of my head, before proceeding to forensically photograph any tattoos, birth marks or scars on my body, complete with a forensic scale. It seemed ironic that they hadn’t done this for Cooper’s photographs, but they were making sure to do it with mine.

With little other choice, I complied with the process, with Officer Jeans routinely mumbling “thanks, Rich” every time I changed position. At one point, the lens of the Nikon was held inches from my face, as though the pores of my skin or the back of my eyes were being photographed in great detail. I began to feel like a cadaver being examined by a fledgling medical student.

After dropping my trousers to enable the surgical scars on my knee to be photographed, we returned to the stifling hot interview

room. Officer Polo was setting up an old-fashioned ink block and had placed a large bucket of sterile wipes and a roll of tissue paper on the interview desk. My eyes landed on a sheaf of paper fingerprint cards labelled 'RSSS', which stands for Regional Scientific Support Service, and Officer Polo began to explain that they would be taking my fingerprints from every conceivable angle. This included under the tips of my fingernails, between my fingers, the sides of my hands, my wrists and—bizarrely—my feet. This was *way* beyond usual process, and I suspected that the purpose of all this was to attempt to match minor parts of my prints against those recovered from specific areas of firearms (the trigger, guard, hammer and so forth) used in previous crimes. When I queried the reason for the procedure, Officer Jeans laughed, and, in his broad northern accent, remarked "It's just if you're a terrorist, like, and you go and blow yourself up, it's so they can identify you by the soles of your feet." Needless to say, I wasn't amused. I could only assume this was another procedure authorised by terrorism legislation, under which I had *still* not been arrested.

The process was extraordinarily laborious, with Officer Jeans acting under the guidance of Officer Polo. Being honest, the whole situation felt surreal. I was far too hot, and my throat was parched. My hands were being manipulated as though they were not my own, and I listened to Officer Jeans say "thanks Rich" every time Officer Polo blew air through his nose and examined the resulting prints. I could only assume my photographs, fingerprints, footprints, and DNA was being fed back into some kind of 'Five Eyes' intelligence database, to be shared with the United States of America, Canada and other 'allied' countries. I thought about the typical visa questions: "*Have you ever been arrested or investigated for terrorism-related offences?*" I was pretty sure I would never be permitted to enter the USA after this.

Eventually, still none the wiser as to where my photographs would be sent, I was returned to my cell to be reunited with my congealed Pot Noodle and my cup of coffee, which had developed a thin skin which appeared to be acting as a lid. I sat down on the bunk and tried very hard *not* to think about whether I would ever see the sky again.

“Politics, it seems to me, for years, or all too long, has been concerned with right or left instead of right or wrong.”

Richard Armour

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SOME TIME LATER (it's amazing how unfair it feels, being stripped of the means to tell the time), my cell door was opened again, and I found myself being escorted for a third interview. Sani sat waiting for me, in civilian clothes this time, and I realised I had no idea what time it was... it must have been late in the evening. It seemed farcical that my watch had been confiscated, but I'd been allowed to keep my shoelaces, depression notwithstanding. We shook hands and I closed the door before he got down to business.

"So... they're going to further arrest you during the next interview."

This didn't really surprise me, but what shocked me was what for. I looked at the disclosure paperwork in sheer disbelief.

- *Possession of an incapacitant spray, found within your car.*
- *Possession of a baton, found within your car.*

This was outrageous. I had not kept, stored, or carried either of these things in my car, and there was no way on this planet that those items had been found there.

I told Sani straight. "But, this isn't true."

He wasted no time in countering me. "It must be, it says so in black and white." Even as a defence solicitor, he placed absolute faith in the credibility of information received from the police.

"Sani, those things were *not* in my car."

He frowned and bit his lip in thought. "So where have they got them from, then?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. Had they been planted? I'd experienced police corruption before at the hands of my own local police force, but now the neighbouring force too...? How far did the rot spread? The RSOU? The entire country? Was this a systemic problem, or were the police just out to get me specifically?

As usual, my mind began to process the situation in logical steps. Although I did indeed have a spray (of sorts) inside the car, it was legal, professionally mass-produced, and was clearly labelled as ‘Temporary Witness Identification’ spray. The ingredients were listed on the label, it was non-toxic, and it could be freely purchased from Amazon, eBay or any of the large national police and military suppliers, including Niton and PatrolStore. It had been around for decades and was originally called ‘Stoppa’. I had ordered a couple of canisters for myself and Anna following a road rage incident some years ago, and I had deliberately settled on that particular product as I wanted us both to carry something legal. It was often bought by lone joggers, dog walkers, late-night bar workers... There was absolutely *no way* that a large group of specialist, anti-terrorist trained police had mistaken the clearly labelled canister for some kind of illegal incapacitant spray.

My mind ran back to my original police training on the powers of arrest. Each arrest must be on *suspicion* of the offence, as only a court of law could find someone guilty. Furthermore, an officer must have *reasonable grounds* to suspect that a person had committed the offence in order to arrest them for it. Was it reasonable to suspect I possessed an incapacitant spray based on the fact I owned a mass-produced, commonly available, and lawfully held product, designed only to identify offenders? I thought probably not, but my views didn’t count.

As the third interview kicked into gear, Detectives O’Connor and Bennett arrested me as planned, however, I noted they didn’t arrest me on simple suspicion—I was told I was under arrest *for* possession of an incapacitant spray and *for* possession of a baton. They were presented as absolute offences; for whatever reason, my innocence was no longer in question.

“Tell us about the incapacitant spray.”

“There was no incapacitant spray in my car.”

They stared at me in disbelief, faltering momentarily. “An incapacitant spray *was* found in your car.”

“No, it wasn’t, there was no incapacitant spray.”

The silence hung in the air. I pressed them.

“Do you have a photograph of it?”

Detective O’Connor blinked and stumbled over his words. “Well, no, it’s... It’s just the officers are at the scene, you see, and we’re... We’re here.”

PART 3: CONFRONTING THE ABYSS

No matter what they hoped, I wasn't just going to roll over and admit things that weren't true. There was no way that the officers seizing it didn't have the tools or technology to transmit a digital photograph of the items over to Detectives at the Stock.

"Have they described it to you?"

"No."

"Have they read the label?"

"I... I don't know."

I wanted to bang my head against the desk in frustration. Against my better judgement, I began to explain what the item was. Detective Bennett scribbled her notes haphazardly, occasionally crossing things out and starting over. I'm not sure whether it was genuine disinterest, or if they were being mindful of the PACE clock,* but whenever I tried to provide background detail which I believed was pertinent, their body language suggested they wanted me to simply get on with it and confess to whatever they were accusing me of. Eventually, they changed the subject.

"So, tell us about the baton that was in the car."

"There was no baton in the car."

They both stared at me incredulously. DC Bennett's mouth hung open. "But—"

"There. Was. No. Baton. Absolutely categorically not. Do you have a photograph of it?"

"No."

We were starting to go round in circles. Again, there was absolutely no way whatsoever that any experienced police officer could possibly mistake anything kept inside the car for a baton, which, insofar as I understood it, was a recently prohibited article. There was a combined whip and glass-breaker in the car, yes. Should there have been? No. But was there a baton? Absolutely not.

Moving on, I found myself being arrested for possession of *another* incapacitant spray; this one having been allegedly found in my home. Patiently, I explained that it was either a second can of the Temporary Witness Identification spray, or it was a legal-to-own product called 'K9-17' which was previously marketed as 'Bite Back'. It came in a

* Police are permitted to keep a suspect in custody for up to 24 hours in total without needing to apply for an extension.

silver canister (also clearly labelled) and was a moderately pressurised combination of natural oils such as lavender and lemon, which were supposed to deter aggressive dogs. The manufacturer's website stated:

"K9-17 meets all European and UK HSE legislation requirements, and indeed has received derogation (exemption) from the EU's Biocidal Products Directive as it has been assessed to only contain food/feedstuff and therefore poses minimal risk to humans and canines alike. The spray is legal to carry and does not fall under section 5(1)(b) of the Firearms Act. The spray is formulated with natural oils and not deemed to be noxious."

Neither of the Detectives seemed to care what it was, presumably thinking I was preparing a hastily constructed, flimsy attempt at a legal defence. I told them one of the canisters was partially empty as I had used it twice (with great success I might add) on some local ankle-biters. The product had actually been recommended to me years ago by a police dog handler. Eventually I lost interest in trying to explain things, as it was clear neither of the Detectives believed a word I was saying.

Demonstrating that the entire book was going to be thrown at me piecemeal, I was then arrested for 'possession of material likely to be useful to a terrorist'. This accusation related to my owning *The Anarchist Cookbook*, authored by William Powell.* The book's publication had been a defining moment in the underground anarchist moment of the post-Vietnam war United States; it contains some genuinely interesting narrative on the psycho-social upheaval occurring at the time. Despite remaining freely available to purchase for decades, stockists quietly started to stop selling the book after 9/11, due to the inclusion of many instructions and recipes which are generally regarded as 'bomb-making' guides. There is actually an interesting theory which suggests the book was intentionally published by the American government as a form of misinformation, so that those who wished to start any kind of rebellion would likely seriously harm themselves by following the instructions it contained.

* First mentioned in chapter 2, the book is 54 years old at the time of writing, and Powell had reportedly compiled it in 1969 from publicly available information found in the New York City Library.

Only a few years ago, Powell was tracked down by a crew of filmmakers who shot a documentary interviewing him, where he allegedly expressed regret for the content of the book and the negative complications it had caused across the world. I had the film somewhere on my hard drive but hadn't watched it yet. As explained earlier, I had owned the book itself for many years; it was one of my (many) prized possessions. I have always been a firm believer that the state should *not* be the gatekeeper of human knowledge, especially of information which originated from the public domain.

I tried explaining this to Detectives Bennett and O'Connor, who didn't care in the slightest. They tried to hurry me along, eager to skip my thoughts on the social commentary, with DC Bennett pressing to confirm whether I had any awareness of the 'bomb-making' elements of the book. In their blinkered view, there was only one reason that someone would own such a book—because they were unhinged, bent on causing chaos and destruction. There was no concept of a spectrum, not even any middle ground. Sani had definitely been right on the money—they were trying to pigeonhole me, trying desperately to fit me into whatever profile they had crafted. In some ways, I began to feel as though I were being portrayed as another budding Unabomber.

As part of my autistic behaviour, particularly in times of stress, I had spent many years gradually amassing an enormous collection of books. I had a general interest (partly fascination, partly financial motivation) in collecting strange, unconventional, or obscure books, and it simply happened to be that many naturally revolved around themes people found uncomfortable or preferred to avoid—death, war, cannibalism, social resistance, torture, poisons, interrogation.

A very small proportion of the books I bought had, in various ways and at various times, been subject to controversy or suppression. Alongside *The Anarchist Cookbook*, they included *The Satanic Bible* by Anton LaVey (which actually isn't about what you'd first think), *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X, *The Turner Diaries* by William Luther Pierce, *The Gates of Janus* by Ian Brady, *The Open Square* by Ford Clark, *Industrial Society and its Future* by Theodore Kaczynski, and *The International Jew* by Henry Ford. All of these books had suffered heavy criticism at some point in history, and the more time passed, the less 'relevant' they became.

Then there were just the ‘regular’ unusual books I own. I have a signed copy of *Bronson* by Charles Bronson. I own a very expensive signed (and authentically prison-stamped) copy of *Villains We Have Known* by Reg Kray. I have a trio of very costly, limited print run books on hallucinogenic plants. I also own some books about cannibalism, which include *Contingency Cannibalism*, a ‘recipe’ book which refers to the butchering of the ‘long-pig’. I admit, they aren’t to everyone’s tastes, but none of this makes me a danger to society. Of more than a thousand books kept in my home, so far the police had isolated a single publication to fixate on, wilfully ignoring the wider context.

Bar *The Anarchist Cookbook*, I had never read many of the more controversial books, preferring to keep them in pristine condition as most were considered rare and collectors’ items. I had spent a significant amount of money acquiring them, which I kept as a private affair. Whilst many people had seen the majority of my book collection, I had never showed a single person my smaller, private collection, because I was confident that they wouldn’t understand my motivations. I had carefully and protectively packaged all the more sensitive and contentious books into sealed boxes, which I then placed in a specially selected and alarmed storage unit. This was rather expensive, but I felt it was a worthwhile cost, given the combined value of the collection, which probably amounted to many thousands of pounds.

The Detectives didn’t know about this smaller collection yet, but they would discover it in due course. I could have enlightened them on the backstory of *Loompanics* or *Paladin Press*, the FBI interest in the same, and how this led me to discover people like Kevin Mitnick, but I was confident that such a topic was probably beyond both their interest and intellectual scope. Alas, after the way they had treated me, they could get screwed. I would volunteer nothing, and only answer questions they asked.

DC Bennett then began quizzing me about my political views. I told her I wasn’t interested in politics, and the existing two-party system was essentially pointless and corrupt. I didn’t expand on the point, but I could have readily added that in a capitalist society, government is always ruled by industry, the two being intertwined over their shared love of money.

“What about immigrants?” Detective Bennett asked.

“What about them?”

“What are your views?”

Aside from the fact the RSOU officers couldn’t differentiate between politics, economics, and sociology, it was nothing short of staggering that such an *enormous* topic, one of endless, raging international debate, could be boiled down into such a bland, generic, open-ended question. Immigration issues were highly complex, and encompassed human rights, war crimes, religious beliefs, economic principles, moral and ethics, education, employment and integration, and national identity.

I’m not sure what kind of answer they were hoping for, but I told them it was an extraordinarily complex issue; my response, however, seemed to be an instant turn-off. Instead, Detective Bennett switched to yet *another* fabricated agenda.

“Are you a member of the BNP?”

What in the name of bloody hell were they on about? I had never been a member of the BNP, and with what little interest I had in the world of politics, I didn’t even think they were still a valid party.

“No.”

“Well, we’ve found a BNP membership card with your name on.”

“No you haven’t.”

“Yes, we have.”

I raised my voice moderately, looking DC Bennett dead in the eye.

“No. You. Have. Not.”

This louder and more direct approach seemed to make her uncomfortable. The officers were evidently as dissatisfied with my answers as they were with my lack of a sweeping side parting and toothbrush moustache. I could have told the officers about the time I stumbled across a group of social media users who were plotting to attack Muslim businesses overnight; I reported the matter directly to MIS.* However, it was painfully obvious that neither DC Bennett nor DC O’Connor would have believed a word of it, so I kept my mouth shut. It seemed I was now either a far-right extremist, or a terrorist.

The interview was eventually terminated, and I was escorted back to my cell for the umpteenth time, where I eventually found myself

* I communicated directly with an intelligence operative via an encrypted email address. He asked to meet with me, but I denied his request. He had the information, and I had nothing more to offer.

pacing backwards and forwards, over and over. It was only fairly recent knowledge to me that this is a trait common to ASD, referred to as ‘stimming’—short for self-stimulation. Like rocking, finger-rubbing, or humming, it was often a completely automated and repetitive action which began in times of heightened stress. At times, I was particularly prone to leg-jiggling, hand-flapping, and pacing. I had nothing else to do and, feeling the increasing pressure, I was becoming more and more stressed and distraught. I felt like a lion in the zoo, and the walls had become too close for comfort.

In a moment of contemplation, I realised that almost every time I had lain down on the bunk and closed my eyes, the cell door had opened as though someone *wanted* to disturb me, so I settled myself back, closed my eyes and waited for the magic to happen.

Clunk.

The cell door opened, and a short, muscular man wearing police uniform casually strolled in. At that point, I smiled inwardly. I don’t care what anyone else thinks, there is definitely something strange about life, spirituality, and the very nature of things that, as human beings, we don’t currently, and likely never will, understand.

“Ey up, I’m the Inspector, how are you feeling? In the circumstances, of course.”

I sighed, and it emerged more prominently than I had anticipated. “About as good as you can expect.”

He smiled sympathetically. I continued speaking, my voice quiet.

“Thinking about being remanded made me realise that I never got to say goodbye to my wife... To tell her that I love her. Both of my dogs are my companions, they’re like my best friends, but they’re elderly and by the time I get out they’ll probably be dead. They’ll never know what happened to me, where I went, or even why I left them.”

He slid his hands into his pockets and looked down at me, sympathy etched on his face. “Well, we don’t know what’s going to happen yet, do we?”

I did. Having been arrested for firearms offences, apparently owning prohibited weapons, and being considered a pissing terrorist of all things, probably with many more arrests to come, it would be an absolute miracle if I was bailed. That being said, I reminded myself, miracles *do* happen.

Author's note:

Section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 is widely regarded as one of the most contentious pieces of modern criminal legislation. It has an absurdly broad scope, and has been the subject of furious argument and debate within both legal and academic circles over the years, with disagreement over interpretation also evident between the police, the CPS, and the House of Lords. Unfortunately, these clashes have only resulted in the definitions expanding rather than narrowing. The addition of the Terrorism Act 2006 muddied the legal waters even further, in places seeming to contradict the earlier section 58.

One excellent summary paper, published in *The Modern Law Review* in 2009,* pointed out the ludicrous premise of the offence of possessing or collecting material ‘likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism’:

“The potential breadth of the offence is evident from the fact that almost any thing that is of general use in carrying out our day-to-day activities is also useful to terrorists. Terrorists might need clean clothes, so washing machine instructions are useful to terrorists.”

In addition, the authors observed that the House of Lords seemed to have done little in the way of meaningfully interpreting the section 58 legislation, particularly in relation to what action(s) might justify commission of the offence. An interesting, and quite valid, parallel was drawn with other legislation relating to ‘possession’:

“It is plausible to require those possessing a knife in a public place, for example, to provide a reasonable excuse for doing so. In that way, we ensure that liberty to buy knives is protected whilst reducing the risk of knives being used criminally. But it is difficult to justify section 58 on the same basis [...] Whereas widespread possession of knives substantially erodes security against being stabbed, we might doubt that widespread possession of information that anyone can get hold of at any time substantially erodes security against terrorist attacks.”

* Jacqueline Hodgson and Victor Tadros (2009), ‘How to make a terrorist out of nothing’, *The Modern Law Review* 72(6), pp. 984–98.

Almost every book I own was purchased from Amazon or eBay, and because of the widely-varied laws from country to country, scans of the books could be found within seconds on the internet. What was freely available in one place was outlawed in another. In any event, it would be far more straightforward for any potential terrorist to simply buy or pirate a copy themselves than break into my home or storage unit in search of books amidst the clutter. I feared that the RSOU would not share the authors' reservations, however.

Another paper, published in the *Cambridge Law Journal** in the same year, criticises the internal inconsistencies of the Terrorism Act 2000, and the reinterpretation required to impose any kind of consistency on the legislation:

"Sections 57 and 58 of the Terrorism Act are ill-thought-through offences that oscillate between criminalising silence in suspicious circumstances, criminalising conduct that can in fact be shown to be connected, however remotely or indirectly, to future acts of terror, and conduct that may conceivably increase the risk of such acts being committed. The thin veneer of logic [...] can hardly mask the fact that the House is bending over backwards to leave this prosecutorial scatter-gun arsenal undisturbed."

There are also questions surrounding sentencing regarding possession of items/articles under section 57 and 58, which have the potential to be disproportionately more severe.

For example, in January 2018, Greek national Nikolaos Karvounakis placed a device consisting of explosive material and nails in Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh. The device failed to detonate but significant injury could have been caused had it done so. Karvounakis claimed responsibility, announcing himself as a member of the 'International Terrorist Mafia'. In October 2023, Karvounakis was sentenced to eight years and four months' imprisonment.

In contrast, however, Jacob Graham from Liverpool was found in possession of an "online arsenal" of information on his computer and was sentenced in March 2024 to 13 years' imprisonment, an extended licence period of five years, and a notification requirement of 30 years. Unlike Karvounakis, Graham had never left his house.

* Antje du Bois-Pedain (2009), 'Terrorist possession offences: curiosity kills the cat?', *The Cambridge Law Journal* 68(2), pp. 261–63.

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MY CELL DOOR opened for the last time.

“Come on then, time to get you bailed.”

I opened my eyes and frowned. I was unsure whether I was dreaming, and if I wasn’t, this was a particularly cruel trick to play. But then again, as I’ve touched upon several times already, a large part of policing, particularly interviewing and investigation, is psychological. The necessary processes *always* have a dual purpose.

I stood up and was led back out of the west wing to the custody desk. Detective Ainsworth was still clutching her clipboard, along with a boxed mobile phone and a sim card kit. She stood next to Detective Bennett, and both women gave me strained smiles as I approached. Like the hackles of a dog, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up in a kind of primal warning. Danger was in the air.

“We’re just getting your bail conditions sorted and we’ll be right with you.”

I tried to keep a poker face, giving as much to them as they’d given to me. I looked around and remembered I had no idea what time it was; it felt like night-time. Two young, uniformed officers were booking in a dishevelled-looking black man opposite me, who was being given the opportunity to have his country’s embassy notified of his arrest. He looked just as confused as I felt.

DC Ainsworth offered me the phone box and sim card. It was a cheap Nokia 105, and the sim card was for the EE network—it was in a sealed cardboard sleeve with “£10 credit” and “8GB data” printed in bright yellow in the top corners.

“Here’s a phone for you.”

“Why?”

“Because we took yours.”

This is a big lesson: the police don’t *ever* do quid pro quo. I stood looking at the box. Detective Ainsworth didn’t move either, holding it out expectantly. We were at a stalemate.

“It’s just something we do,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

I still didn't take the phone, although part of me was growing curious. Why did they want me to have a mobile? I knew from my time on the Missing Persons Unit that the police can track you via cell site triangulation, and going one step further, it was known that the Security Services (MI5, MI6, and GCHQ) could remotely activate your phone's microphone to eavesdrop on you. However, I doubted such high-level organisations would have any interest in me, and instead I settled to assume that, with it being a cheap, lightweight phone, it would be fairly easy for the RSOU technicians to install basic microelectronics inside, allowing for continued, localised audio recording. I snapped back to reality, noting Detective Ainsworth seemed close to giving up.

"You don't have to take it if you don't want."

I couldn't resist the opportunity to dismantle the phone later, so I took the bait. Taking the phone, I thanked her. She smiled grimly and turned her attention elsewhere. She was a consummate professional, devoid of soul. I examined the box. If she was being genuine and it was just a normal mobile phone, it would likely be part of a bulk purchase. The RSOU would have a large crate full of the things, and the IMEI (always visible on the exterior of the packaging) would be recorded on a database before the box was assigned to me, along with a randomly selected EE sim card from a similar stack nearby. There would be no reason whatsoever for anyone to open the box, insert the battery, plug the phone in and so on. If this was run-of-the-mill, the box should be sealed.

I turned it over in my hands... The plastic seal had been slit with a knife. I pretended not to have noticed, saving any further examination for later. The Detectives were getting into a disagreement with the custody Sergeant, a light-skinned West Indian woman with immaculate hair. Expressing frustration, the Sergeant claimed that nobody had 'built' the offences. For context, the primary software used by many police forces is called Niche. Introduced in the very late 2000s, it was a confusing jumble of a system containing many different screens and fields. It was supposed to amalgamate the incident reporting system, the custody system, and the intelligence database. The rather clever selling point of Niche was this: the greater number of police forces that adopted it, the more those forces could 'talk to' and exchange data with one another.

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Anyway, the custody element of Niche was appalling when it was first introduced. It was notoriously difficult to navigate, and as a result, the officers hated it. The people who developed the software made it about as user-friendly as the command line interface of Debian Linux. The same custody element was still appalling when I was dismissed from the police service in 2017, and it was obviously still appalling now, several years later. DC Ainsworth was busy protesting her innocence to the Sergeant, who looked less than impressed.

“To be honest Sarge, we’re not from here. We’re not sure how it works.”

I let the dust settle on that statement. A Detective from the RSOU, a Senior Investigating Officer no less, was standing in front of me claiming “We’re not sure how it works.” I lost interest and went and sat on the bench, eyeing a nearby middle-aged woman with suspicion. She had the tired, resigned and somewhat frumpy appearance of either an appropriate adult or a social worker... at least until I saw her lanyard read ‘Police Officer’.

A few minutes later, DC Ainsworth beckoned me back to the custody desk. I glanced down at the waist-high screen embedded in the front of the desk and recalled many of the times I had asked prisoners to electronically sign for their bail conditions. The plastic pen was attached to a metal wire which was always too short. However, the screen was not on, and the custody Sergeant addressed me in her bored-but-lilting accent.

“Before we go over your bail conditions, do you currently have any thoughts of self-harm?”

Arrested at work. Embarrassment. House searched. Job loss incoming. Financial problems. Home at risk. Terrorist watch list. Added to the no-fly list. Ex-police officer. Media circus. Mugshot in the national news. Courtroom sketches. Prison. Risk of violent assault. No support. Wife alone. Dogs dead. Reputation ruined. Career over. No meaningful work ever again. Pension depleted. Dependent upon others for the rest of my life. Shunned by society.

“No.”

“Do you agree to abide by the conditions?”

The Sergeant handed me a sheaf of paper and I glanced through the long list. I had to live and sleep at my home address, I was not permitted to leave England and Wales, I had to surrender my passport

to the police, I was not permitted to purchase or acquire any firearms, knives, or other “offensive weapons” (that one seemed unfairly subjective), I was not permitted to delete any digital data, and I was not allowed to use Proton Mail... This is an encrypted email service based in Switzerland, and I had only signed up for it experimentally. I didn’t like their interface, finding it difficult to navigate, so I didn’t really use it for anything other than accessing one of my bank accounts. The fact the police didn’t want me using it suggested they didn’t like it. If they didn’t like it, it’s probably because they struggled to get access to it when they wanted it.

I briefly mulled over the conditions. The grounds for imposing them were to prevent me interfering with witnesses or committing an offence while on bail, but it wasn’t at all clear to me how those grounds were applicable to the conditions—there were no witnesses in my case, and there was no indication of what kind of offence the police were expecting me to commit. As with the whole experience thus far, attempting to make logical sense of what was happening was a fool’s errand. In addition, if I was not permitted to leave the country and I had to surrender my passport to the police, surely this meant I was considered a flight risk. If I was a flight risk, why was I being granted bail? I decided to ask Detective Ainsworth why I had to surrender my passport.

“We’ve already seized your passport.”

“Well, if you’ve seized it, how am I supposed to give it up?”

She looked impatient. “It’s just a technicality. We’re not allowed to take it without your consent, so if we don’t put the request for you to surrender it down as a bail condition, you could just ask for it back.”

I stared at her trying to process this information. Part of my own struggle with autism is what I call big red button syndrome, meaning if I see a large red button with ‘DO NOT PUSH’ emblazoned upon it, my first instinct is to push it. As articulate and introspective as I am, it’s extremely hard for me to explain why this urge exists, but it does. I stared at DC Ainsworth and considered asking her to give me my passport back, but then I thought this might be something Anna called ‘poking the bear’.

In some other part of my mind, a diagnostic thought process was occurring. My passport had been seized from my home, but the police were essentially now admitting they hadn’t had any lawful grounds to

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seize it. So, in a bizarre motion, they were forcing me to accept bail conditions in which I would agree to surrender the passport I didn't have, meaning the police could legally keep something they had unlawfully taken to begin with. If I didn't agree to this, in all likelihood, my bail would be refused. Although acceptance of bail conditions was generally interpreted as 'consent', the word 'coercion' was more applicable in practice. Just like the police force I used to work for, the RSOU clearly had a knack for circumventing the law when it suited them, and this situation proved that they also knew full well how to cover their tracks to make their unlawful actions seem legitimate should they ever be subjected to scrutiny. I would just be painted as the unimportant party; nobody *ever* listens to the word of the criminal.

"Fine."

"OK then."

The custody Sergeant printed some more copies of the bail sheets while DC Bennett smiled awkwardly at me. Her demeanour seemed genuine, and even now, I'd like to believe that, inwardly, deep down, at least some small part of her recognised that I wasn't the violent, terrorist-in-training she'd been led to believe. As much as I hated everyone in my sight, I couldn't help but think she seemed nice, and would probably find a more satisfying career elsewhere. Some people are just better than the police service.

"I'll get you those details for the autism support service."

"Thank you," I responded.

With little else to add, Detectives Ainsworth and Bennett began figuring out how to leave. In the meantime, I realised the bail conditions listed the address I should return to as 'Unknown Location'... so much for being prim and proper. I wondered whether officers seconded to the RSOU had to be trained in the art of navigating their way out of brown paper bags.

The custody Sergeant offered no help in pointing out the exit—she avoided making eye contact, having obviously returned to the typical British police resting state of serene ignorance. My minders were forced to obtain assistance from one of the fresh-faced uniformed officers still booking in their own prisoner opposite, but the female Detention Officer with the long legs dropped her floppy-looking homemade sandwich, stepping in to show us the way out instead. There was a momentary 'no, you do it' moment between Detectives

Ainsworth and Bennett, neither wishing to go outside, presumably into the darkness and the cold. It reminded me of *Father Ted*, when Mrs Doyle and her friends used to go to a tearoom, and the inevitable fight would break out over who was going to pay.

DC Ainsworth clearly drew the short straw (perhaps falling on her sword as the SIO) and the Detention Officer pulled on her padded jacket, drawing the fur-lined hood up over her head. I was handed my property back in two separate plastic bags, and our little trio left the building the same way we had entered—through the bubble. I noted the PIN code for the exit door as we left. Old habits die hard.

The weather outside was fairly grim, and it was dark. We walked past rows of marked police cars, some of which were unlocked, and I looked around, spotting numerous other insecurities. This seemed a badly planned way for suspected criminals, either bailed or charged, to leave a custody suite.

As if she had read my mind, Detective Ainsworth commented similarly to the Detention Officer. “This isn’t very good, having to walk all the way out here.”

Presumably having heard it all before, the Detention Officer mumbled in agreement as the wind whipped at her hood. She pulled it closer to her face as rain started to lash down.

DC Ainsworth informed me that Anna would be waiting outside. Her parting words were “I’ll give you a call tomorrow,” as the gate clanged shut behind me. I heard their footsteps move away, and I looked around. I was standing in another police car park, this one for employees, and my mind absolutely boggled. Here I was, a suspected terrorist and apparent converter of firearms, who had been subjected to a sizeable, multi-force counter-terrorist operation. I’d just been given semi-unlawful bail conditions, nobody asked me to sign them, the return address didn’t exist, and then the SIO had left me to my own devices in a car park full of personally owned police vehicles, some of which inevitably belonged to the RSOU officers working on the same operation intended to send me directly to jail. It would have taken me less than five minutes to pinpoint the cars belonging to the cadre of officers investigating me—I would have looked for dealership stickers from neighbouring counties, any sign of third-party sat-nav systems, A-Z roadmaps (these are always a surefire way to pick out cars belonging to the Security Services, as they often travel nationally

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at short notice) and signs of any spare clothes or overnight kit/wash bags. My disbelief was palpable.

Instead, I dutifully made my way out of the car park, slipping around lowered barriers adjacent to a security control booth, and spotted Anna parked a short distance away. I slipped into the warmth of the car, immediately finding myself mugged by our two dogs, who huffed, panted, and strained against their harnesses to lick my face all over. It was wonderful to see them, and at every reunion, no matter how brief our time apart, they made it clear that I was their whole world.

In knowing silence, Anna slipped the car into gear, and we quietly drove away.

“It is not simply the individual who benefits from and is protected by rights, but the society as a whole. Protected freedoms to dissent and criticize those in power help keep abuses of power in check. They combat tendencies of elites to become isolated from and ignorant of the people they deeply affect through their decisions.”

David Wong

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WE TRADED STORIES on the journey home. A combination of Anna's personal recollection, copies of the police paperwork, and remote access to our home CCTV cameras filled in the blanks for me. Ultimately, it seemed as though far more coordination and effort had gone into the act of arresting me at work and pulling our house to pieces than into any necessity to follow legal requirements whilst adhering to fair, transparent processes.

We live on the border between two counties. A warrant to search our home had been sworn out at the Magistrates' Court in the neighbouring county around three weeks prior to my arrest, on 3 January 2024. Strangely, the section which stated: 'This warrant was applied for by' had been left blank.* The purpose of the warrant was to search for:

- *Items resembling firearms.*
- *Devices capable of ejecting airsoft projectiles.*
- *Components used to modify airsoft weapons.*
- *Paper receipts for modification equipment.*
- *Manuals, guides and instructions for airsoft weaponry.*
- *Electronic devices/storage components and USB devices to obtain purchase history, instruction on assembly of items purchased or manuals for modification in relation to airsoft items.*

The warrant was not physically signed, but bore the typed name of a Justice of the Peace. Non-police staff authorised to attend included:

- *Forensic Management Team (FMT)*
- *Digital Media Investigators (DMI)*
- *Military Explosives Investigators*

* The instructions in the footnote clearly instruct the completing officer to 'Enter the name of the applicant.' This is echoed in section 6.33(e) of The Criminal Procedure Rules 2013, confirming a warrant should bear the name of the applicant.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

- *Police Search Dog*
- *Trained and Accredited Search Officers*
- *Prevent Contact Officer*

This all sounded grossly excessive for plastic airsoft weapons, and I remembered the Detectives' written disclosure, handed to Sani before my first interview... The police had received a tip-off that I had been "amassing a collection of whips", and had shown an interest in applying for a shotgun licence. So, if that was the extent of their information, what *had* they told a judge to enable them to get permission for military explosives investigators and 'Prevent' counter-terrorist officers to attend?

I considered this carefully. Had I been on a watch list since purchasing *The Anarchist Cookbook* over 20 years ago? If so, what was the point in sending Prevent officers *after* I'd been arrested? Surely that was counter-productive, unless the goal was more fiddling of statistics. Were the RSOU hoping, on paper, to increase the number of investigations Prevent had been 'proactively' involved in, given that the end of the financial year was approaching and new budgets were being calculated? Or, was the mention of Prevent just for show, intended to encourage compliance from the judge signing the warrant?

At least some of the answers were staring me in the face. As I had seen in my second interview (when DC O'Connor presented my eBay purchase history), the police, in a very similar manner, must have presented selective information to the judge when applying for the search warrant. Regardless of *how* they obtained it, the warrant had simply been the first stage in a carefully orchestrated fishing trip, with the police using weak, transparent reasoning to justify their overly invasive actions, in the hope of discovering something so significant it would cause any unscrupulous or underhand processes followed to (conveniently) pale into insignificance. This was my wife's warm welcome to the murky world of the RSOU, the 'by hook or by crook' school of policing. It was all just further evidence that the Ways and Means Act was still alive and well. As I had seen time and time again, the police service made their own rules.

As buildings and streetlights flashed by in the darkness, I mulled over the timeline of events. I left home at around 05:45 that morning, stopping in at a supermarket on the way to work. As the police knew

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where I worked, all indications were that I had been under covert surveillance, and I was arrested at 07:08 on suspicion of possession of a section 1 firearm *following* a warrant at my address. However, our CCTV system showed that no warrant had been executed at that time.

A few minutes after my arrest, numerous police vehicles had begun to quietly arrive in a small car park near my home. The main RSOU operational vehicle was a dark grey, unmarked 71-plate Ford Transit. The vehicle was not fitted with any covert lighting, so it would be highly unlikely to arouse suspicion in a semi-urban area. Other vehicles involved police dog units and both marked and unmarked vehicles from various neighbouring forces.

Continuing to play back the footage, I watched five officers approach our front door on foot at 07:16. Four were in tactical gear, one held a riot shield, another held a canister of ‘K9-17 spray’ (the very same legally obtainable product I would be arrested for possessing, under the claim it was an incapacitant spray) and, to my anger, a third officer was holding a fire extinguisher. I know from experience that the *only* purpose of this was to spray our dogs in the face should they have come out of the front door to say hello, something they often did as our previous postman fed them treats. What made matters worse is that two of the officers were dog handlers—I could only imagine the beating you’d receive if you let loose with a fire extinguisher at point-blank range against *their* dogs.

The group were also armed with Tasers and were led by a plain-clothed female officer in a tactical jacket, who would introduce herself as Temporary Detective Sergeant Elisa Harding, the lead search coordinator. They knocked at the door, and, having woken Anna, verbally engaged with her at 07:18, informing her they held a warrant to search the premises. Now ten minutes after my arrest, the search warrant had *still* not been executed.

By this time, I was sitting handcuffed in the back of the police car, being driven to the Stock. My unlocked phone was being interrogated by plain-clothes RSOU officers in my workplace car park. The extraordinary discrepancy in timing rendered my arrest unlawful, as no firearms had been physically seen, let alone seized. Therefore, under what grounds was my phone taken, unlocked, and examined?

Back at home, the process of falsifying records began. DS Harding endorsed the warrant claiming the search began at 07:20, now twelve

minutes after my arrest. This was not the case—the search would not commence for *at least* another 45 minutes. The officers refused to begin actively searching until our two dogs were contained somewhere safe and out of the way. So, Anna made moves to place them in our second car, a Toyota. The RSOU officers had no clue that we kept a second vehicle at the address, despite it being parked openly at the front of the house. In retrospect, this seems almost unbelievable given that the car had been registered and insured to me, at our address, for around six months. As it hadn't been searched, they wouldn't let Anna access it. The officers informed her that the single warrant they possessed didn't cover the Toyota, and DS Harding sheepishly advised they would need to obtain an *additional* warrant to search the car before the dogs could be secured in it.

Some phone calls were made while everyone stood around idly. Thirty minutes later, the warrant had apparently been sworn. Anyone with any relevant experience will immediately see this as a red flag—obtaining a warrant in such record timing, particularly (i) from the scene of a large-scale search, and (ii) outside of a judge's standard working hours, is close to impossible. The newly obtained warrant (the paperwork being provided to Anna 14 hours later) documents that the search of the Toyota began at 07:50 and ended at 08:03.

My wife finally placed our dogs into the Toyota at 08:05, now 57 minutes after my arrest. At this point, around thirty officers, split into numbered search teams, trooped inside. Each had been assigned a specific room or area. Our house has three bedrooms, a bathroom, an attic, a hallway, a kitchen, a lounge, a dining room, a long garden and four different outbuildings. By this time, I had been locked in a cell, with the justification given that the police wanted to ensure "prompt and effective investigation" into the section 1 firearm they had apparently discovered. It was a breathtaking pack of lies.

Throughout the search, which concluded at 15:00,* two plainclothes officers were designated to guard Anna. Both individuals identified themselves as members of the RSOU—one named 'Gurp' and the other 'Ian'. Despite their affiliation, neither divulged their true role or objective. Both men sat with her in the lounge whilst the search

* According to the paperwork, which failed to take into account a further search by a police dog and handler.

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teams began their work. They were friendly and professional in their demeanour, unlike one of the other officers present, who, during the search, apparently tried to make a joke out of asking my wife to examine his prostate. Presumably this was another example of the RSOU's "prim and proper" and "by the book" approach.

Thankfully, despite the prolonged, close-quarters contact, Anna was switched on enough to understand that with the police, there is no such thing as 'general conversation'—everything you say *can*, and *will*, be used against you (and those you love) in a court of law, whether you have been cautioned or not.

“Civil disobedience is not our problem.
Our problem is civil obedience.”

Howard Zinn

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AT THE SAME time my Toyota was being searched at home, Anna's Mini was being searched at my workplace. The power to conduct the search came from a second search warrant, which—just like the warrant for our home—had *also* been sworn on 3 January. However, unlike the warrant for our home (which had been sworn out in the *adjacent* county) the warrant for my wife's car had been sworn out at the Magistrates' Court in our own county. This struck me as inexplicably odd.

This meant that a peculiar pair of simultaneous events had to have taken place: on the same day, two officers from two different police forces, but both seconded to the RSOU, attended two different courts in two different counties (over twenty miles apart), to swear out two identical warrants which related to the very same matter. The electronic warrant application permits the officer applying to give details of any additional premises that may require searching, which includes vehicles. So, why did Anna's Mini not feature as an 'additional premises' on the search warrant for our home? Why had the RSOU officers gone to so much trouble to obtain two different warrants from two different judges in two different courts?

The only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn is that the evidence the RSOU possessed to support the warrant application (presumably the tip-off about a "collection of whips", alongside my eBay activity documenting purchase of a pistol-shaped key ring and a magic wand) was thin at best, and so they decided to hedge their bets by swearing out two different warrants in two different locations—if one was refused by whichever judge they encountered, they would be able to fall back on the second warrant, in the hope that a trail of evidence would naturally lead them from one location to the next. This went some way to explaining the selective highlighting of words relating to my eBay purchases; it bolstered the officers' claims that they had reasonable grounds to suspect I was... well, I wasn't quite sure *what* they actually suspected. They seemed to think I was some

kind of terrorist, that much was clear at least. I could only assume ‘real’ terrorist activity must have been slow over the past few months.

Two officers named ‘Khan’ and ‘Walker’ had searched Anna’s Mini, but to get into it, they must have used the key. The key was inside the security office at work, which was restricted access—the only person who could access it was me. The officers began searching the Mini at 07:48 but didn’t get legal authority to enter or search the office until 08:50. So, I wondered, how *did* they get hold of the car key?

Despite the limitations of the warrant, officers Khan and Walker seized both the front and rear dash cameras, two strips of cheap red LED footwell lighting, a can of the legal-to-own Temporary Witness Identification spray, and a glass breaker with a length of steel cable attached to it, described as an ‘improvised whip’. Whilst I freely admit I shouldn’t have had the glass breaker (although it wasn’t a ‘prohibited item’, so anyone could legally purchase them, import, sell them, and so forth), I remained utterly perplexed as to what grounds had been used to seize the other items. Either way, the search paperwork proved beyond *any* doubt that my arrests for possession of an “incapacitant spray” and “baton” had been deliberately falsified, as neither item had been found in the car I was driving.

With the search of the Mini now complete, my manager arrived at work at around 08:45 to a cluster of RSOU officers demanding access to various parts of the building. I assumed the officers had deliberately waited to arrest me at work as it would conveniently provide powers to search the premises under section 32 of PACE.* However, as I had exited the building in advance of their arrival, the officers had no idea which offices or rooms I had come from, so that particular legal power went out the window. Instead, they were forced to wait until my manager arrived to seek assistance.

Search authority for the security office was instead granted under section 18 of PACE, which required the authorising Inspector (a Temporary Inspector, no less) to have “reasonable grounds to suspect” that evidence would be found on my work premises. Given that I had been arrested, my phone had been seized, my car key had been taken and my vehicle searched, I highly doubted that the Inspector, if questioned, would be able to justify exactly how they formed the

* See footnote on page 279.

necessary ‘reasonable grounds’ to suspect that evidence which may have justified a search warrant at my home would lead to *more* evidence being found at my workplace.

Regardless, my manager pointed out the security office, which was then sealed off whilst an in-depth search took place. Some officers branched off to the IT department where they conducted a forensic download of my work email account—the police never informed me that they had done this, and as with the section 18 search, I remain unsure of the legal grounds permitting them to do so. To ensure no stone was left unturned, my personal locker was then searched.

The swarm of RSOU officers eventually left my workplace at around 13:30, taking the items seized from Anna’s car and the original search paperwork to DC Ainsworth. However, the paperwork I had been given confirmed that the search of my locker was *authorised* at 16:20 by an Inspector who, conveniently, didn’t write their name legibly enough for it to be read, and was notably a *different* Inspector from the one who authorised the section 18 search of the security office. So, if a search of my locker was authorised at 16:20, how was it *legally* entered before 13:30? The fact the police hadn’t found anything wasn’t the point; it was a strict matter of legal principle. The military term to describe the searches so far would be ‘FUBAR’.

Back at home, DS Harding had asked Anna about our external CCTV cameras, wanting to know whether there was a unit in the house that they record to. Assuming they were simply looking for any and all digital storage, Anna explained that no, there was no ‘unit’, just two cameras connected to power inside the house via cables drilled through the wall. I had set them up, that was all she knew. In hindsight, we both realised that removing a CCTV storage device would conveniently mean that neither Anna and I, nor anyone else, would have access to the footage of their approach to the house (including the riot shield and fire extinguisher) and their comings and goings throughout the day. In this, as in everything else, transparency was certainly not the name of the game.

Around midday, Anna began to ask questions about her Mini, which remained secure in my workplace car park. At 14:20, she was informed her car was ‘ready to collect’—the search had been completed *prior* to 09:00, so why was it ‘ready’ over five hours later? As she deliberated exactly how she was going to collect it, my wife

recalled that consideration was being given to bringing a police search dog into our house; apparently the physical search was close to completion. However, Anna protested about the police dog due to the presence of our own two dogs (who were still unceremoniously locked in my Toyota) and so DS Harding promised the police dog would not be brought into our home whilst Anna was away from the premises.

At around 14:30, Anna was driven to the Stock by Gurn and Ian in a dark grey unmarked Hyundai i40 saloon. Her car key was collected before she was then chauffeured to my workplace. In an interesting turn of events, Gurn and Ian left the car park first. I concluded this was likely to have been a deliberate move, in order to allow my wife to drive away in the belief she wasn't being followed. She was, and remains, entirely innocent of any wrongdoing; she returned home, arriving at 15:15 to find, contrary to what she had been told, the search still underway.

It transpired DS Harding had gone to the nearby shops for some food, yet in contrast, Anna wasn't even able to use our kitchen lest it 'disturb' the search. Upon the Sergeant's return, it was agreed that the police dog would now enter, and everyone was instructed to leave the house. The officers suggested, conveniently, that it might be less stressful for our own dogs if they were removed from our home completely whilst this aspect of the search took place. As such, Anna took our two dogs for a walk in the cold, and Sergeant Harding helpfully estimated this process would take about an hour to complete.

I stopped to mentally question several aspects of this process. First, how on earth does it take a dog and handler an hour to search one single house? Second, although the warrant paperwork stated a 'police search dog' was permitted to attend, it did not specify which type of police dog could be utilised. Search dogs are commonly trained to find one of four things: drugs, explosives, money, or bodies. The warrant only allowed searching for items resembling firearms, airsoft weapons and parts (which are mostly constructed of ABS plastic) along with related paperwork and USB devices. There was no mention on the warrant of explosives, live ammunition, cash, or drugs. Once again, this underpinned my belief that the entire operation was a fishing trip. I assumed, given the presence of 'military explosives investigators', that the dog would be searching for explosive material, although (given that I'd purchased *The Anarchist Cookbook* more than two decades before and had never attempted to blow anything to smithereens in the

meantime) what led them to conclude I possessed anything of the sort was beyond me. Third, the search dog was being introduced *after* a horde of around thirty police officers (many of whom, in all likelihood, dealt with issues of firearms, drugs and explosives on a regular basis) had been traipsing through our house for over eight hours, inspecting items, sweating, leaning against walls, kneeling on floors, and reaching into crevices. What was the chance of the dog picking up a related scent, known as a ‘false positive’, from the skin or clothing of one or more of the officers? Or was this outcome *precisely* what the police had hoped for—that the dog would conveniently ‘indicate’ a scent left by one of the search team, which would then justify a further search, likely involving removal of carpets, doors, dismantling of sofas and so on?

So, at around 15:30 Anna obediently took our dogs and left the premises, leaving the search team to do their work. As she spoke, I picked up the warrant paperwork, upon which Detective Harding had confirmed the search process had finished at 15:00. Yet Anna recalled that the officers were still searching at 15:15 when she returned home. This meant the search dog had been introduced *after* the search had been recorded as complete. This didn’t seem fair. Using a police dog to conduct an additional search of the premises once the original search was over was either entirely unlawful (as per PACE*), or DS Harding had been dishonest in the one piece of paperwork she had to fill in... Accountability was obviously not one of the RSOU’s strong points.

At 16:00, Ian called my wife’s mobile, informing her that she was now free to return home. She arrived back around 16:15 fully expecting to be let back into our house, but instead found herself being discouraged from entering due to ‘ongoing processes’—DS Harding announced the officers were now documenting their seizures. Ever a woman of good patience and grace, Anna put our dogs in the Mini and travelled to the adjacent town for a change of scenery. She informed me that she returned home at 18:00, but the RSOU officers continued to discourage her from going back inside, warning they were *still* not finished. It had now been two hours since Ian’s original call, and one must always consider whether seasoned, experienced Detectives are prone to making such errors in judgement. I was fully aware that both

* Section 6.9B of PACE states that “No search may continue once the officer in charge of the search is satisfied whatever is being sought is not on the premises.”

PACE and the Human Rights Act makes it unlawful for police to prevent an occupier from having access to their own home.*

The police eventually permitted Anna to return inside with our dogs at around 19:15. The officers were still working and had set up shop in the living room. One officer was sitting at our dining room table acting as the exhibits officer, and items seized were being placed on the floor for photography prior to being taken away. In practice, the decision as to whether to seize items was being made by the exhibits officer after the search had concluded, meaning any suspected firearms could not have been seized from the house until at least 16.15, nine hours after I was arrested on the basis of their existence.

According to PACE, officers are only entitled to ask questions which assist in furthering the search—anything else classifies as an interview and requires the police caution. Despite this, Sergeant Harding asked Anna a handful of questions which would have legally constituted an interview, but failed to caution her, or inform her of her right to legal representation. Anna chose not to provide any answers.

The circus eventually left at around 21:30, having spent over 14 hours in our house.

Prior to everyone leaving, Anna requested details of the staff who had been present. She estimated there had been around thirty officers inside our home, many of whom were in plain clothes, and most of the officers in uniform weren't wearing any visible identification. She had actually requested a list at the very start of the day and had been promised a copy when the search was over. However, as soon as the officers began leaving, her request was hurriedly refused—she was abruptly told “That's for *our* use only”. She was also not provided with a copy of the ‘Notice of Powers and Rights’, a further legal requirement also known as the ‘Notice to Occupier’.[†] At the time, she wasn't aware that she should have been provided this, but concerningly, not *one* single officer present bothered to make her aware of her legal rights. The only things she was given were copies of the two search warrants and duplicates of the property seizure paperwork.

* Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 confirms no public authority shall interfere with the individual's right to respect for, including access to, their home.

[†] Section 6.7 of PACE states that, unless it is “impracticable to do so”, the police will issue the occupier with a copy of the Notice of Powers and Rights.

Once the officers had left, my wife noticed that the warrant for the Toyota (apparently obtained earlier that morning) was an almost identical copy of the warrant for our home—it had the exact same date of issue (3 January) and had been completed by the exact same Justice of the Peace. The list of non-police staff authorised to attend was also identical—why would Digital Media Investigators need to examine a Toyota? It was a perfect clone of the warrant for the house. Examining it closely, the *only* section which had been changed was the location: our home address had been blanked out and replaced with the Toyota's registration number, which was typed in a different font. It looked as though the original had been scanned, edited and re-printed.

I was furious; I already knew the whole thing was a massive stitch-up, but deep down, I couldn't quite believe how corrupt the processes had been—for me in custody, for Anna at home, and for my property at work. Nothing had remained untouched by the dishonest fingers of the police. I didn't *want* to believe it, but the evidence was right in front of me. I glanced at the clock on the dashboard; the time was 23:15. It was late, and I was emotionally and physically drained.

As Anna pulled up to our home, something began nagging at me. I got out, taking a torch from the side door pocket. I began searching the car for a tracking device, microphone, or any other signs of interference, and discovered the battery had been recently disconnected. The positive terminal cover was in the 'up' position, and the negative terminal cover had been removed completely, and was balancing precariously on a black pipe. If it had remained there for any length of time, vibrations from the engine would have caused it to fall off through the gap below, disappearing forever onto the road beneath.

As neither of us had touched the battery terminals, I now had reasonable suspicion that a tracking device had been fitted to the car, probably spliced into the vehicle's electrical supply. I could find no evidence of this, however, not helped by the fact both dashcams had been seized. I assumed that allowing Anna to leave my work premises (therefore giving her the opportunity to 'bolt') presented an ideal opportunity for Gurn and Ian to call in and test any tracking or monitoring systems which had been installed.

Did that mean they were listening to us?

We would soon find a further indication that yes, they probably were.

“No trumped up or imagined crime was off limits if it meant putting me behind bars. They shut down my businesses, bank accounts, took our computers, lied in statements, lied to judges...

it was anything goes [...] As such I don’t doubt for a minute that the authorities could find a way to put any manner of incriminating stuff on a computer that I owned if they really wanted, by way of another excuse to knock me down again, possibly finish me off.”

Tommy Robinson
Enemy of the State

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ENTERING OUR HOME made me feel like a stranger—the search had been truly invasive. If I had been shocked by the account my wife provided during the journey home, the surprises that waited for me inside would make her account pale in comparison.

Initially, it looked like the RSOU officers had taken pretty much everything I owned—I had been left with my clothes, board games, and some books. Much of what the police had taken didn’t remotely match the items they were *supposed* to be looking for. Although I knew that the police did have a power to seize other items if they had grounds to suspect they were linked to, or evidence of, other offences, I failed to understand how the items they had taken could be remotely linked to criminality.

I picked up copies of the search warrants. Despite there being limitations on areas that could legally be searched (as outlined in PACE*), Anna reported the officers had looked through our chest freezer, removing frozen food. They had removed the lid of the toilet cistern, fishing in the water. They had gone through every single coat pocket, no matter how small. They had emptied the kitchen cupboards, pulling out tins of beans and packets of spaghetti. They had searched a barrel of bird food in the garden. They had even examined (and photographed) my work clothing, including several pairs of combat trousers, presumably based on my prior eBay sale of a “black tactical police-style jacket”.

As I slowly began to walk around the house, it looked as though none of the officers had worked in unison—there appeared to be no logical rhyme or reason to many of the seizures, indicating the team was either utterly disorganised or there was an ulterior motive at play. I wondered what exactly their briefing had consisted of, and what the true objective of the search had been.

* Section 6.9 of PACE states “Premises may be searched only to the extent necessary to achieve the purpose of the search, having regard to the size and nature of whatever is sought.” For example, you can’t look for a stolen motorcycle in kitchen drawers.

Contrary to the limitations of the warrant, I found the police had taken my collection of wooden walking sticks, some which I used following surgery on my knee and ankle. They had taken my Sony Alpha mirrorless digital camera. They had wrenched the GoPro off my motorcycle helmet and taken that. They had seized my set of bamboo eskrima sticks. A Wi-Fi range extender. A collection of *completely* legal, folding pocket knives which had blades less than 3" in length—they were boxed and had never even left the house. They took my passport (which DC Ainsworth had already admitted they had no grounds to seize). My personal body camera that I used in summer when walking the dogs. I turned over the paperwork, finding even more. They had taken a folder containing photographs. A lock-picking kit. My Amazon Kindle. They took two digital audio recorders. Some exercise equipment. An arrow. They'd even taken my Flipper Zero. Absolutely *none* of this was permitted in PACE, yet they'd done it anyway. My original tutor from the Centrex training centre, an ex-Detective Chief Superintendent, would be rolling in his grave if he knew. Many of my books had also been taken, but in a particularly slovenly move, had been laconically listed as "Quantity of books".

As I walked, I also discovered that many other items were missing—they were no longer present in our home, but nor had they been listed on the seizure paperwork. Anna confirmed the police had not mentioned (or documented) 'seize and sift' powers, where they can remove items in bulk for later examination, and thus I could only consider the missing items to have been unlawfully seized or stolen. My black leather wallet had gone. I had no meaningful relationship with my parents, and my wallet contained the only photograph I owned of me as a baby. It also contained my driving licences and my bank cards, along with a lucky charm a lady had once given me. My custom-made wedding ring was also missing—why would they take that? A souvenir wooden bat. A folder containing paperwork. A shovel. A craft kit to make resin. The more I searched, the more absences I discovered. A pair of foam nunchucks: gone. A blue silicone mobile phone repair mat: vanished. An Apple iPhone: disappeared.

I slowly began to realise the enormous implications of what the police had done. They had made me a *persona non grata*. For a start, I couldn't log into my online bank accounts. Because my bail conditions prevented me from using the email address registered with my bank, I

couldn't request a password reset. Because they had seized my phone, I couldn't receive a text message confirmation to verify my ID. Because they'd taken my driving licence and passport, I couldn't even go to the bank in person for help because I had no way of proving who I was—they simply wouldn't speak to me. I couldn't cancel any standing orders, pay my credit card bills, or log into my insurance accounts. I had been completely stripped of my ability to do anything meaningful in society. From the moment I had been bailed I had started accumulating debt, meaning my credit score would begin to suffer.

I continued to flick through the search paperwork, the lazy scrawls of the exhibits officer spilling over the straight black lines of the form. I found the manner in which items had been recorded (or in some cases, hadn't) entirely inconsistent, and a perfect example of unprofessional, sloppy behaviour. Any person is legally entitled to know precisely what the police have confiscated from their private dwelling, and subjective and non-specific descriptions like "Quantity of digital devices", "Quantity of sticks", "Quantity of jewellery", and "Box of weapons" (all actual examples from the paperwork) provided no help whatsoever in being able to determine the true extent of what was really missing, or why it had been considered relevant in the first place. Had they used such generic descriptions to allow them to surreptitiously plant evidence among my belongings? I had no idea, but worryingly, it didn't seem beyond doubt. The lists certainly weren't in keeping with what the public would expect from a highly trained team of specialist search officers, one of England's ten Regional Organised Crime Units.

Glancing at the bottom of the forms, I saw the exhibits officer hadn't even written their name or rank, they had simply scrawled a barely legible, four-digit collar number. Absolutely everything was contrary to the requirements clearly specified in PACE*—it was as though the police officers were mercenaries, operating completely outside the boundaries of the law, doing as they pleased.

I found myself thinking about the digital content I no longer had access to—the police had taken my laptops, my memory cards, and USB sticks. Every single personal photograph I had ever taken over the

* Section 8.2 of PACE states the warrant shall be endorsed to show "the names of the officers who executed it and any authorised persons who accompanied them".

last twenty years was kept on my hard drives; now they had all gone. The stories and poems I had written. Every single one of the few pleasant memories I had: they had all been stripped and taken. I had been left with so little, and I felt a cold emptiness growing inside me. How was *any* of this justifiable? We lived in an increasingly digital world, but surely that didn't mean there weren't rules and restrictions governing what the police could seize and trawl through.

As I thought about my hard drives, I suddenly had a lightbulb moment: the police finally had their hands on two things I suspected they would consider an unexpected bonus. First, they had my original, digital manuscript for *Rotten to the Core*, the book I had been writing and intending to publish about my negative experiences in the police. Second, my photograph archives meant they had the footage I had recorded for *The Centrex Policeman*. What was going to come next? Historic charges brought under the Official Secrets Act?

For me, of course, my collections—digital and otherwise—were more than just things. They were my coping mechanisms, my comfort blankets, and a connection to the small part of myself which still remembered how to take an interest, feel enjoyment, learn new skills and ideas. One of my walking sticks was homemade, and I'd felt such a sense of achievement in carefully preparing and varnishing it. My ability to listen to music or audiobooks was gone with my phone and laptops; so was any way for me to pursue photography, one of my only meaningful hobbies. It's not an exaggeration to say I felt bereft.

There was so much to consider I didn't even know where to begin. Not for the first time, I felt completely overwhelmed.

I supposed I had to start somewhere, and the most logical place seemed to be at the start. However, it was now past midnight, and I figured that the rest of my analysis could wait for another day. We both wearily climbed up the stairs to our dishevelled bedroom, where I fell asleep exhausted as Anna cried into my arms.

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I WOKE UP early, grateful to experience the comfort of my own bed. I stretched my legs out and stood up, rolling the aches out of my neck and shoulders. Anna was still fast asleep, and for a moment, I could forget the nightmares of the previous day. Everything around me seemed peaceful and calm. I lay still, listening to the birds starting their morning song, the high notes providing a rich contrast against the deep rumbling of a train passing by, somewhere far over the fields. I couldn't remember the last time I had valued privacy so much—it's something people so often take for granted.

I gingerly tip-toed into the bathroom, my wrists still red from being handcuffed. Glancing in the mirror, I found that I looked dishevelled—I hadn't been able to clean my teeth or wash in the Stock, so I hopped in the shower and let the hot water slowly wash away my discomfort. I don't know how long I stood there, just breathing, somehow trying to find my centre. Inhaling the steam deeply, I closed my eyes, only for my vision to be interrupted by the thought of police officers traipsing through our house, no doubt standing in this very bathroom. My small moment of relaxation was soiled by the thought, so after towelling myself off and brushing my teeth, I slipped into some fresh clothes and went downstairs, followed by one, then two, bleary-eyed (but always hungry) dogs.

After feeding them their breakfast, I realised I now had some time—I had been bailed for three months, the maximum initial period permitted under PACE. Whilst the thought of a clock ticking down is never pleasant, at least it gave me some breathing room to consider everything that had happened. I was now in a fight for my survival. I wasn't going to kid myself; I don't think I stood any chance of winning, but my autism meant I *needed* to understand. I wouldn't be able to rest until I'd digested as much of the situation as possible. This meant collating evidence, researching the applicable laws, documenting the discrepancies, and pushing to have those responsible for wrongdoing held to account. I had a strong sense of 'justice sensitivity', and it never

ceased to infuriate me that, as Noam Chomsky had once written: “For the powerful, crimes are those that others commit.”

Thus, it was a small consolation, but at least I had time.

I opened the front curtains and immediately frowned; there was a beige-coloured Dacia Duster parked opposite our house that I didn’t recognise. Another element of my autism is having an absolutely appalling memory for some things, yet a virtually photographic memory for others. I’m not sure of the science behind it, but I can follow a route once and know it forever. I’m also particularly good at recognising and recalling combinations of numbers and letters, which is probably why I enjoy computers and programming. The combination of vehicle makes and models and registration numbers are an obvious type of pattern, which is partly what made me efficient at proactive policing. Accordingly, I knew many of the local cars in my area, despite never meeting, or in many cases even seeing, the owners. The Duster was *new*, and I eyed it with a mixture of suspicion and concern.

I thought back to some of my books on anti-surveillance, recalling that one of the key points about covert observations is that to enable the most effective use of surveillance technology, the operators sometimes have to position themselves, or do things, which go against natural human instincts. For example, an operative sitting in an observation post with a telescope or camera needs to be within a direct line of sight of the target. Sometimes, this can cause visual ‘oddities’—little things that stand out, that beckon you, drawing you in, that niggle in the back of your mind. The lessons from the book had been quite clear: *don’t ignore those niggles*.

The Duster had been parked in a small, empty car park. That, in and of itself, was not usual; however, the space it was parked in was. Most people, when given the freedom of choice, will park their car in the greatest area of empty space. This is partly laziness, and partly a common lack of confidence in their own abilities. If parking face-forwards, most drivers will breeze inwards, adopting a wide, swooping arc, choosing an empty cluster of spaces to allow them to swing their driver’s door open to the fullest extent. Think about doing it yourself—nobody likes squeezing out of the door in-between two other vehicles. It’s much better when you can push the door wide open, climb out, and stretch your legs.

The Duster, being parked nose-forwards, was in the space at the extreme edge of the car park, which was, by chance or design, the side and space closest to our house. This meant the Duster had the driver's door positioned directly next to a kerbstone and some prickly bushes. In relation to the entrance, this position not only meant that the driver had to perform a peculiar, S-shaped manoeuvre to successfully park in that *particular* space, but they also caused themselves further difficulties in being unable to open their door fully, due to the risk of scratching the paintwork against the shrubbery or catching it on the kerbstone. Why would someone cause themselves such unnecessary difficulties?

I could see the car had tinted rear windows. It didn't look particularly dirty, and as the Dacia 'brand' is on the cheaper end of the automobile spectrum, I doubted it would come with tinted windows as a factory-fitted standard. Something about the Duster was definitely off, and—trying not to wake Anna up—I quietly slipped my shoes on to go and investigate.

The Duster was a 68-plate, and looking through the tinted windows, I could see a child seat directly behind the front passenger seat. The seat was filled with items most people would describe as 'crap', which immediately raised my suspicions. Thinking back to the rule about visual oddities, any parent who takes their child out of the car doesn't usually stop to load items into the (now-vacant) car seat. This is entirely counter-productive, as the child will inevitably need to be returned to the same seat at some point. It looked like the scene had been set up.

I moved around the other side, discovering that the car seat wasn't even strapped in. The seat belt underneath it, however, *was* secured—meaning the car seat had simply been dumped on top of the (connected) seat belt. The belt had been secured *underneath* the seat to stop any annoying 'beeping' from the car's sensor system. Very few parents are irresponsible enough to drive their children around in car seats which are not secured or fixed into position. Another pointer towards the set-up being fake.

Growing confident that the Duster was an RSOU surveillance vehicle, I began examining the front. The rear-view mirror gave it away immediately: two holes, approximately 1cm in diameter, had been drilled either side of the mirror's housing, equidistant from the central

stalk. The colour of the holes did not match the plastic of the mirror's surround; they were slightly darker, indicating they were tinted covers which had purposefully fitted to hide the camera lens which would have been visible behind them. A 3mm thick grey wire was also visible emerging from the top of the mirror and disappearing into the headliner—many 'budget' vehicles don't have electricity running to the rear-view mirror, and if they do, the wiring is part of a concealed, factory-integrated setup. Visible wiring is a *huge* design no-no.

I looked into the front of the car, observing a similar grey wire running loosely along the centre armrest towards the console. The wire was partially hidden by a piece of fabric in the cup holder, which looked like an old rag. Usually, any wires visible are due to third-party equipment installed by the owner—think about cigarette sockets which power dash cameras and sat-nav systems... wires don't just appear and then disappear again. I strongly suspected a control pad to adjust the camera positions was sitting in the cup holder, sloppily hidden underneath the piece of fabric. I could see the glovebox was also partially ajar on one side, meaning a wire was likely running around the footwell and into the glovebox, which couldn't be shut securely enough for a snug fit.

Despite having two cameras in it, the rear-view mirror *wasn't* facing our home—this meant there must be more cameras hidden elsewhere. Surveillance vehicles often have cameras integrated into every side to make them multi-directional. So, I slowly began to walk around the vehicle, trying to find the other lenses. Although tinted glass is convenient, hiding lenses *behind* car windows causes two significant problems. First, condensation can build up, on both the inside and outside, which can dramatically impair the view. Second, window tint might hide a camera in the daytime, but it makes recording far less effective at night. Therefore, the cameras must be fitted to the bodywork itself.

Puzzled, I considered that metal *could* be drilled but it rusts quickly and would decrease the car's resale value, so I prioritised inspecting plastic areas. I started with side-facing parts, including the fuel cap and the rear light cluster. Nothing looked out of place, and I discounted the alloy wheel due to the likelihood of equipment falling off due to vibrations or accumulating mud.

Then I found them.

PART 3: CONFRONTING THE ABYSS

The Dacia had a factory-fitted roof rack, part of which was black plastic. The DUSTER logo ran alongside the racking; the large letters were chrome-effect plastic. Nestled in-between the enclosed curve of the letter U was a perfect circle, identical in size and appearance to the two lenses in the front of the rear-view mirror. I leaned close and shone a torch into it. It was a professional job, but not good enough. It was another tinted lens, and the biggest giveaway was the smooth surface: it stood out sharply against the textured black plastic. I walked around the other side of the car, discovering an identical camera hidden in the same place on the opposite rack.

I began to mull this over in my mind. The presence of a surveillance vehicle meant the police never *intended* to charge me or remand me at this stage—bailing me must have always been part of their plan. Consequently, this meant they didn’t have everything they wanted, or at least, were not satisfied that what they *had* was serious enough to justify the threat to national security that had obviously sold senior officers on approving the entire shit-show to begin with. But why surveillance?

The police were expecting me to *do* something... but what?

“Ultimately, arguing that you don’t care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying you don’t care about free speech because you have nothing to say.”

Edward Snowden

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I WOKE ANNA up with a delivery of a hot cup of tea, which was well-received in the circumstances, given that I only ever seemed to bring trouble and disappointment. She believed, from memory, that the Duster had appeared on the day the police executed the search warrant. Presumably this meant the RSOU officers were expecting me to begin shifting my cache of machine guns, pistols, grenades, and rocket launchers that the ‘trained and accredited’ specialist officers and search dog weren’t able to find. Except I didn’t own anything of the sort, and after 14 hours inside my home, they damned well knew that.

So, what *was* the purpose of putting me under surveillance? Was it intended as a further method of exploitation? I had disclosed my long-standing depression and anxiety when being booked in, and—if the Duster was so obvious that it was *meant* to be discovered—was it designed to push me over the edge? Had it been intended to drive me into running away, encouraging me to stay somewhere else free from prying eyes, thereby breaking my bail conditions, and giving the police grounds to arrest me again and remand me? Or was it supposed to be a threat, a warning, a notice? *We’re watching you.*

I knew police tactics relating to surveillance and intelligence gathering were closely intertwined. Two years ago, I was at work in a city centre when there happened to be some sort of activist march. The police presence was fairly heavy, and I noticed plain-clothes riders on 125cc mopeds doing circuits of the inner city. The mopeds had boxes fitted to a rear rack, and the riders looked very much like fast food delivery drivers. Curiosity got the better of me and after a short walk on my lunch break, I discovered they were part of a group, based in the rear car park of the city’s police station. They were taking turns doing circuits, and it transpired the ‘delivery boxes’ contained cell-site cloning technology, meaning every mobile phone within radius was briefly connecting to the devices, as they were presenting themselves as cell phone network towers. This meant the riders (who were actually on loan to the force from the Metropolitan Police Service in

London) were simply going round in circles all day, indiscriminately hoovering up contact numbers for every member of the public who happened to be within range of any of the passing mopeds. IMEI numbers, ICCID numbers, they would all go into a police intelligence database, to be stored and cross-referenced against other information. The thousands of regular shoppers, workers, and everyday folk just passing through the area were none the wiser. Thus, I already knew the police had little regard for privacy... If the public only knew.

Thinking back to my own police training, I recalled there were two types of surveillance: directed and intrusive. I pulled some of the law books off my shelves, thumbing through to the indexes. Directed surveillance relates to the intentional, pre-planned watching and following of suspects *in public*. Intrusive surveillance relates to the intentional, pre-planned watching and following of suspects in either their *private home* or their *private vehicles*. Bingo. This must have been intrusive surveillance, given that the Duster could pretty much see into our living room.

Then my jaw dropped. Intrusive surveillance could only be signed off by one of the UK's Secretaries of State (there are sixteen in post at the time of writing, and the most likely would be the Secretary of State for the Home Department) or the most senior officer in the relevant police force, namely a Chief Constable. In all likelihood, the request would have originated from the police before being passed to the government. This meant I was most certainly being portrayed by the RSOU as a potential terrorist threat, which meant somewhere along the line, intelligence officers from the Security Services (most likely MI5 and/or GCHQ) would be working in the background. *Good Lord.*

Suddenly, the terrorist connection all started to make sense. When I arrived at the custody suite, I had been held incommunicado, a status usually reserved for suspected terrorists. I had been subjected to 360-degree photographs and forensic-level photography of my scars; again, a process reserved for terrorists. My fingers, hands, wrists, and feet had been printed from every conceivable angle—again, this would only apply to terrorists. Then the officers had arrested me for an offence under the Terrorism Act 2000, for possessing a 54-year-old book kept locked in secure storage. They even asked me about my political views during one of the interviews.

But how could they justify this? I wasn't a terrorist, and everything the police were doing was effectively a form of persecution. All they had was a malicious tip-off about me collecting whips and being 'interested' in applying for a shotgun licence, and then their covert observations had found records of me ordering a pistol-shaped keyring and a magic wand off eBay. Somehow, that information had been absurdly conflated to suggest I was a threat to national security. But *why*?

Although I had good friends at work from various different countries and continents, I didn't usually socialise with anyone outside of work. In fact, I worked so much I rarely left my home in-between, and on the occasions that I did, I certainly never bothered anybody. I walked my dogs every day and we went out for a meal at a restaurant maybe once every few months. A Iranian family I know brought food to my home after I had my knee operation; they still hug me when they see me. I sometimes played *Pokémon Go!* with a Chinese man I had met in the local area; we swapped numbers and periodically met up. I had loaned a Ghanaian friend £100 after he got scammed, never pressuring him to pay me back. I wasn't a terrorist, or a threat—to anyone. It seemed the police just didn't like the knowledge I held.

Another thought stopped me in my tracks. What use was surveillance video from the Duster without any accompanying audio? I began to think. Yesterday afternoon, Anna had left our home in the hands of Detective Sergeant Harding and the RSOU officers, who claimed they wanted to introduce the search dog to the premises. She had been discouraged from coming back in the house three separate times. This meant the police had been in our home completely unsupervised for almost four hours.

I darted back downstairs and started to scout around. We had a large double sofa in our living room. Directly next to the sofa was a small coffee table, above which was a double plug socket, which we often used for charging our phones. I got on my hands and knees and found, partially concealed underneath both the socket and table, a pair of Gerber *Multipliers*. They were in tactical matt black and were certainly not mine. I looked them up online*, finding them to be a £100 tool, advertised as the best-selling multi-tool to the US military. They

* Ridiculously, I had to do so using my wife's mobile phone while she sat next to me, as all my electronic devices had been seized the day before.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

had a variety of hard-wearing kit on them, including tungsten carbide insert cutters, a wire crimper, and an assortment of screwdrivers. They had a small pair of sharp scissors but no knife, meaning it *hadn't* been used for packaging exhibits.

I flipped the tool open—it was in excellent condition, and many of the components had no signs of wear... *except* the flathead screwdriver. I gently placed the tool into the heads of the screws securing the plug socket; it was a perfect fit.

It made logical sense for audio recording to have been authorised along with the visual surveillance from the Duster. I stood up and went to the kitchen drawer, returning with a packet of Blu Tack. I pressed large pieces over the holes in the socket, mentally reminding myself to come back to it later—it needed some further inspection. As I continued my efforts of stretching and snapping the blue, rubbery substance, my eyes drifted over to my bookshelves.

The True History of the Elephant Man.

Historic Railway Disasters.

Winner's Dinners.

Heal Your Home.

Spiritual Growth.

Primitive Skills and Crafts.

Maths in 100 Key Breakthroughs.

William Shakespeare: The Complete Works.

Looking at the array of titles—now disordered and out of alignment where they had been pushed to the back of the shelves by searchers too lazy to remove them all to check for items concealed behind them—I considered myself as a person. Who was I? I loved dogs. I took nature and landscape photographs. I sometimes tried to grow my own plants, even though I wasn't very good at it. I collected tarot cards. I had tried to learn to play the harmonica and the acoustic guitar. I liked foreign and arthouse-style films. Sometimes I drank rooibos tea. I listened to classical music. I loved baking and was unhealthily fond of blue cheese. According to the police, I was also involved in serious and organised crime, to such an extent that I posed a threat to the safety and security of the UK.

PART 3: CONFRONTING THE ABYSS



Figure 17: Operation Scuppered officers arriving at my home.



Figure 18: The Gerber *Multipliers* dropped below an electrical socket.

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Figure 19: Here are some of the things the RSOU didn't seize...



Figure 20: ...and some more...

PART 3: CONFRONTING THE ABYSS



Figure 21: ...and some more (the magic wand, top, and keyring, right)...



Figure 22: ...and some more. The centre knives are from my survival packs.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

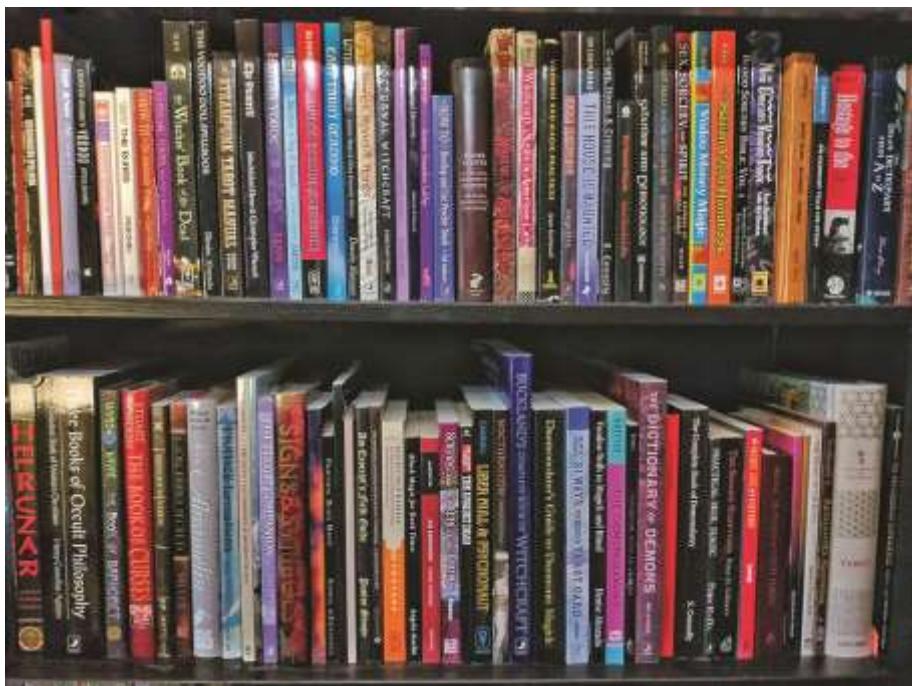


Figure 23: If it was the 1800s, I'd have been arrested for these books instead.



Figure 24: Some of my books demonstrating a genuine interest in police equipment and use of force... all ignored by the RSOU officers.

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THE NEXT FEW hours passed in a haze, leaving me uncertain of what actions I should take, or even the words I should speak. We hadn't experienced a single moment of solitude as I had hoped earlier that morning—quite the opposite. Regardless of the initial legality, our home had been invaded, and the obnoxious intrusion showed no signs of ending. Our privacy would remain overtly compromised until the police decided to withdraw and leave us in peace. However, that prospect was so distant it seemed almost invisible.

The RSOU's single agenda was clear: they wanted me behind bars. It felt like I was battling a group of hungry wolves—the officers planning and moving as one unit, feeding off each other's energy. Their collective behaviour revealed a disturbing pack mentality; they stuck together with unwavering conviction of my guilt, drawing strength from their numbers and combined beliefs. Everything so far proved they were relentless in pursuit of their prey and would persist until I was either imprisoned or dead. In the world of business and economics, this approach would be referred to as the 'sunk cost fallacy', in that people demonstrate a greater tendency to continue an endeavour after a certain investment in money, effort, or time has been made—in essence, the police had committed so much to their warped pursuit of the truth that they could no longer safely back down. I had no real interest in political agendas, but it was quite evident that truth and facts weren't going to halt their onslaught.

I considered the RSOU's unyielding and sweeping approach to gathering gargantuan amounts of my personal information, only to select and isolate bite-sized pieces of evidence which would support their own confirmation bias.* They were sifting through the last twenty years of my life, if not more, with absolute impunity. Private correspondence, items covered by legal privilege, every aspect of my

* This was something they had also done in my home. Nobody wants to photograph a bobble hat or a sombrero, but a balaclava? That's more like it. See Figures 25–28.

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finances, even my DNA... all based on one anonymous tip-off. It wasn't fair, it wasn't impartial, and it was completely devoid of any shred of integrity.

I thought back to the words of the police service oath, a verbal declaration that was a legal requirement for every new officer joining the force:

"I do solemnly and sincerely declare and affirm that I will well and truly serve the King in the office of Constable, with fairness, integrity, diligence and impartiality, upholding fundamental human rights and according equal respect to all people; and that I will, to the best of my power, cause the peace to be kept and preserved and prevent all offences against people and property; and that while I continue to hold the said office I will to the best of my skill and knowledge discharge all the duties thereof faithfully according to law."

Where was the fairness? The integrity? The upholding of human rights? The equal respect? Every single thing the RSOU officers had done was in contravention of the very oath they had sworn to uphold when joining the service. It was as if the Unit was some unlawful abomination, police officers gone rogue, who had sworn their own, twisted version of the affirmation.

I realised I had been standing silently at the window, staring in a trance; my periods of deep thought were becoming more and more prevalent. Drifting back to reality, I found myself becoming increasingly conscious of the Duster—it had the presence of an unwelcome stranger lurking on our front driveway, cupping his hands to the front window whilst silently staring inside, his true intentions known only to him.

Anna and I tried to speak, to converse, to discuss things and share our thoughts, but it's amazing how the natural ebb and flow of conversation is negatively affected when you suspect you're being recorded. Everything becomes stilted, you second guess your use of words and phrases that would otherwise be completely natural; the intrusion was ubiquitous. We couldn't even talk any more without feeling as though the police were present with us, listening behind the walls and waiting.

To be fair, we tried our best to continue life as normal, but on top of our interpersonal communication being affected, neither of us really ate properly. My own appetite had completely vanished the morning I

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was arrested—it was as though I were now a robot, functioning on autopilot, with no need for sustenance. Anything I put in my mouth tasted bitter. I forced myself to drink, to at least stay hydrated, but it was difficult... My enthusiasm for everything had depleted to zero.

That afternoon, we decided to walk the dogs, considering that perhaps fresh air and a change of scenery from the Duster's surveillance cameras would help lift the mood. The dogs were both exhausted from the trials of the previous day, but as always, they wagged, eagerly awaiting their collars to indicate a leg stretch was imminent. For them, there was nothing better in life than the prospect of finding a crispy, dead frog or someone's half-eaten, dropped biscuit.

Anna and I held hands as we strolled into the local park. Our area was fairly small with a friendly community feel—it was partly why we had chosen to live here. We knew many of the dog walkers by sight alone, and in lieu of knowing their actual names, we had given many of them silly nicknames, something I'm sure is quite common among the privacy of couples up and down the country. There was 'Mr Million Dogs', so named for his horde of rat-like creatures which drifted in his orbit, defecating freely without any interest or supervision on his part, 'Mr Mercedes', with his trio of worm-infested, matted hounds which scooted up and down the grass sharing their gifts at every opportunity, and 'Collie Woman' who—well, you can probably guess that one.

As we entered the park, my attention was drawn to a solitary figure slowly making his way towards us. Standing at over six feet tall, he was a white man whose demeanour and posture reminded me of an ex-policeman, a trait I had never observed in anyone else until that moment. Approaching retirement age, he sported a navy-blue Regatta jacket and carried no bag or other belongings. There was no dog accompanying him, nor did he appear to have a specific destination in mind; he was ambling without purpose. In situations like this, it's common for people to exchange greetings or at least make fleeting eye contact. However, this man did neither, offering no acknowledgment as he approached.

Without exchanging a word, my wife and I both lapsed into silence as we approached the figure; it was as though we had shared the same concerns via telepathy. As the man neared us, being drawn into the cloak of our shared silence, he deliberately averted his gaze and feigned interest in the nearest tree, as if it held the most

captivating secrets he wished to unlock.

As we passed by each other, I resumed talking to Anna, though I can't remember what about—it was just inane conversation aimed at making noise, something to break the silence. However, as I began speaking, the man halted directly behind us. Sensing him eavesdropping, I turned to find him acting nonchalantly, his hands casually tucked into his pockets as he leaned over a small memorial plaque on the grass, reading it with exaggerated interest. In any other circumstance it might have been comical, but given the increasing gravity of my situation, it felt like a poorly scripted farce. As though he was suddenly aware of being observed, the man continued on his way, slowly disappearing up the road.

I appreciate there's a fine line between suspecting that you're being subjected to foot surveillance and accusing every Tom, Dick, and Harry within a half-mile radius of being a government spy. However, we both agreed that we had never seen the man before and that his behaviour was certainly unusual. As the Duster proved, surveillance operatives try to blend into their surroundings, but also have to balance the effectiveness of doing so against the need to achieve results. This is why surveillance operations are much easier to conduct in crowded places, and much harder in rural areas.

Now much more alert, we continued our walk, remaining vigilant for unknown faces or odd behaviour. It only took a couple of minutes to find someone that fitted the bill. We cut through onto the pavement, walking alongside the road. A lone woman in absolutely pristine jogging attire was walking towards us, so we turned right, doubling back into the park. The entrance we chose was *filthy* with churned-up mud, which wasn't a problem for our wellington boots. Partway along the path I suddenly turned around. Unexpected U-turns cause chaos for surveillance operatives, as unless they're working as part of a multi-operative team, their cover can be blown instantly.

As I expected, the woman had made moves to follow us, suddenly finding her Nike trainers sinking into the mud. Nobody who chooses to dress in expensive sports attire was going to make the conscious choice to enter this kind of terrain. I looked at her; she immediately turned her back, pulling out her mobile phone as if she were sending a message to someone.

She spun around, quickly walking back to the footpath she had

left only seconds earlier. She was now the other side of some metal fencing. This would have allowed her to maintain her vantage point, to keep ‘eyes’ on us, reporting back to any other operatives in the area, who would have been able to adjust their positions, moving to take over. I noted that—despite her get-up—she certainly hadn’t been running. She wasn’t sweaty or red-faced or dishevelled. We exchanged glances, and she stopped walking once she thought she was out of my line of sight.

Naturally, should these antics ever come to light, I’m fully aware that the RSOU would vehemently deny any and all involvement. Denial often serves as the first line of defence: unless concrete evidence is presented (which many accusers lack), claims of surveillance are typically dismissed as mere coincidences. If allegations persist, however, the defensive strategy can shift to unpleasant accusations of paranoia, other, undiagnosed mental health issues, or difficulties with addictions. The initial police tip-off had claimed I was unstable and acting erratically, so again, I had to ask myself: was this all deliberate? Had the surveillance been made so conspicuous that it risked triggering some kind of paranoid reaction from me, thereby allowing the police to use evidence of my reaction to validate the original tip-off used to secure the search warrant?

Sani’s words rang in my head once more: *It’s clear they’ve got a narrative with you. They seem to be trying to make things fit that narrative.*

It cannot be denied that surveillance is a powerful tool. Due to its secretive authorisation and execution, records are seldom brought to light. Many remain sealed or conveniently vanish, especially at higher political levels. The state prefers to keep details of its methods hidden, as exposure risks bringing many unwelcome challenges for both the police and government. For instance, any evidence obtained from lawful interception of communications is *never* presented in court, to avoid scrutiny of methods and practices by organisations like the MI5 and GCHQ. Consequently, this creates an evidential void, often filled with unfounded accusations against the individual under surveillance. The target can, if they are not careful, walk into quite a messy trap.

Unfortunately, I was already knee-deep in it.

“Our reputation as a country that believes in human rights, justice, fairness, and the rule of law—indeed for much of what the Services exist to protect—risks being tarnished. Public confidence is being eroded with people doubting the ability of our Services to protect us and questioning the rules under which they operate.”

David Cameron

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WE RETURNED HOME, and I tried to force down something to eat. The Duster still sat opposite our house, and I tried to determine whether it would be recording to local storage (which would need an RSOU officer to come and collect the car in order to transfer and view the video files) or whether it would be transmitting a ‘live’ feed. Considering the cost of wireless data transfer, a live feed didn’t seem financially viable—the police only had limited resources to waste.

I considered it most likely that the car would be swapped for a different vehicle, probably within the next 24–48 hours. Batteries only have a restricted life, and continuous video recording can be a significant energy drain. Just to make sure, I wandered outside and waved at the camera lens. If it *was* a live feed, anyone watching would see me waving, meaning the Duster would be swapped or removed as soon as darkness fell. If it was a localised recording, the car might remain in situ for another day or two, perhaps longer.

Returning inside, I mulled over what to do next. After lunch, I decided to do some tidying up. Anna had been put through absolute hell the previous day, and she coped with it far better than anyone else I know would have done. The house had been ransacked and my stuff was everywhere. It was probably due to my ASD that I kept all my own possessions private—it had taken us *many* years of living together for me to even accept sharing space on a bookshelf with my wife, lest any of my books become misplaced or damaged... I couldn’t deal with a book with a bent cover. Not that it was much consolation, but at least the police hadn’t shown as much interest in Anna’s belongings.

As I moved about, I found part of the flooring in the hall was dislodged, a USB extension cable had been damaged, and there was a thin layer of mud running throughout the property. The least I could do was start putting things back together.

I went upstairs into the spare room first, as this was where our usual ‘ironing pile’ was stored, except lately it had grown to cover the entire bed. I began picking up a few boxes, shifting things about before

I spotted something odd. Sitting in the corner of the room, on top of a rucksack, staring me directly in the face, was a knife. It was my Cold Steel *Outdoorsman*.

I knew from the search paperwork that the police had taken every other knife I owned. I had a collection of folding pocket knives which had been seized. A small collection of Spyderco locking knives had also gone. My collection of very expensive Cold Steel knives (all legal, boxed, and kept for investment purposes) had also been taken.* So why was this one still here? I had two camping rucksacks; I kept a Cold Steel SRK in one, and the *Outdoorsman* in the other. Both rucksacks contained otherwise-identical kit.† This particular rucksack was previously packed away neatly in the corner of the room. This meant the police had emptied the rucksack, found the knife, and placed it carefully on top before leaving. But they had taken all of my other knives, so why leave this one?

The purpose of the knives being in the rucksacks was simple. Many years ago, I used to enjoy overnight stays in woodland, practising camping and bushcraft, and it was something I had hoped, one day, to enjoy again. I had watched knife reviewers on YouTube rave about both the SRK and *Outdoorsman* as being razor-sharp and hard-wearing. Splitting wood, feathering sticks, cutting fruit and mushrooms—they could do it all, come wind, rain or shine. Practising bushcraft without a blade was like camping without a tent or barbequing without a grill. I assumed either the police had left it because they wanted an excuse to return, or because they were incompetent and had forgotten it. It was a puzzling scenario, and I wondered what else had been left lying around. I was unable to rid myself of the thought that these officers were supposed to be the region's best.

I began a systematic sweep of the house and was astonished at what I discovered. As I had already suspected, it didn't look like the officers executing the warrant had been working towards a common

* Collecting knives is a hobby more than one of my former police colleagues engaged in; Ben Turner, the Beat Manager from the last estate I worked in as a police officer, collected Spyderco knives and had recommended them to me; another colleague I remain in contact with collects very expensive, custom-made knives.

† Water filters, first aid kits, sleeping bags, compass, fire lighting kit, emergency food rations, cooking utensils, and a shemagh... Exactly what you'd expect to find in a bug-out bag.

goal or purpose, which indicated they hadn't been given a suitable briefing.* Anna had recalled that DS Harding seemed surprised when they entered the house—clearly our home didn't meet their expectations. After all, the presence of an antique piano, a violin, an acoustic guitar, and home-grown herbs in the kitchen doesn't (I assume) adhere to the typical profile of a domestic terrorist.

I continued my sweep, working methodically from room to room. Every new discovery made it more evident that the RSOU had just wanted to get inside our house, no matter what. I already knew they hadn't done their research in advance, because they were completely unprepared to find my Toyota parked on the drive. This could have been ascertained in advance from DVLA records, or even a drive past the property. In addition, they didn't have a clue about the number of outbuildings, which meant they hadn't looked at the house on Google Maps or requested an aerial flyover. Everything suggested that the orders to get inside our property, by any means necessary, had come from somewhere at the higher levels of police command. The reasoning or justification didn't appear to have been shared with the ground-level troops, as it was plainly evident the officers had no idea what they were supposed to be looking for. For example, where knives were seized from one room, they weren't seized from the adjacent ones. Where digital cameras were taken from the living room, they were not from the spare room. If the officers were working as well-briefed teams towards a common goal, there was no evidence of them doing so. Part of me couldn't help but wonder... Was this revenge?

I gradually assembled the items which *hadn't* been seized in the living room, trying to take stock and make sense of the situation in front of me. The execution of the search warrant in our home was a perfect dichotomy—how and why things had been considered as evidence was entirely inconsistent and illogical; we were living in a theatre of the absurd.

The warrant had permitted search and seizure for electronic and USB devices, and to that end, the police had taken my laptops, mobile phones, external hard drives, and various USB sticks and SD cards.

* Guidance note 6B of PACE Code B states it is important that "all those involved in a search are fully briefed about any powers to be exercised and the extent and limits within which it should be conducted."

However, they *hadn't* taken a 1-terabyte external hard drive connected to the PlayStation, two Raspberry Pi 400 computers (complete with installed operating systems), a 2-terabyte external hard drive from the study, an Orange Pi Zero 2, four different USB sticks, and 16 micro-SD cards: together, they represented many gigabytes of data storage.

Elsewhere, the police had taken my bamboo eskrima sticks, walking sticks, and an authentic Irish blackthorn shillelagh, lazily grouping them together on the search paperwork as “Quantity of sticks”. However, they *hadn't* seized one eskrima stick (despite taking the other three), a solid wooden staff, or the walking stick I had dried, carved, and varnished myself.

The search paperwork also confirmed the police had taken all of my (legal to own) impact weapons, mostly saps and blackjack which I had purchased and photographed for my book, *A Concise History of Modern Impact Weapons*. Like the ‘sticks’, these had been unhelpfully described on the records as “Quantity of weapons.” But the police *hadn't* seized a large section of deer antler fashioned into a club, a smaller, bone fishing priest with a leather wrist strap, or an LED torch presumably designed to look like a truncheon.

Officers searching downstairs had seen fit to seize one of my lock-picking sets, but the officers upstairs had—for no discernible reason—ignored two other lock-picking sets, as well as a Brockhage lock-picking gun. The officers downstairs had seized my older Kindle, but the officers upstairs had not seized my newer Kindle, which they left untouched on my bedside table. The officers working in the bedroom had taken every knife they could find, yet the officers searching the adjacent spare bedroom took no interest in the knives there, choosing not to seize the *Outdoorsman*, along with a boxed and oiled South African Kudu, and a folding, serrated RUI in a canvas pouch.

The officers in the spare room had seized “2 x wrist recording devices” from a box of assorted electronics, but the officers working in the bedroom chose not to seize another, quite obvious, wrist recording device on top of a chest of drawers.

The team searching the hallway had taken my GoPro camera off my motorcycle helmet. Likewise, the officers in the living room seized my Sony Alpha digital camera. The officers upstairs in the spare room, however, ignored a similar action camera, a Panasonic video camera and three miniature cameras, all containing micro-SD cards.

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Figure 25: Part of my hat collection.



Figure 26: More of the hat collection.

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Figure 27: Even more of my hat collection.



Figure 28: The only three hats the RSOU cared about...
Note that the middle one says "Global War on Terrorism".

Whoever was examining items on the landing saw fit to seize a cardboard box containing a number of brand-new catapults and associated ball-bearings. However, the officers directly underneath them in the hallway took no interest in a Milbro catapult which had obviously, at some point, fallen into a box of hats.

The discrepancies were endless, they just went on and on. When I was arrested at work, both my personal mobile phone and work phone were seized, but a Nokia kept amongst my belongings in the spare room was ignored. Khan and Walker, the officers who searched Anna's Mini, had taken both the front and rear dash cameras, but the officers in our home ignored the Transcend dash camera sitting on the living room table... I had only installed the new cameras a few days prior to being arrested. The same officers had also seized a canister of Temporary Witness Identification spray from the car I had been driving (which would later be intentionally misrepresented as "incapacitant spray"). However, the officers executing the warrant in our house had taken no interest whatsoever in an identical canister of the *exact* same product, which was still in a basket under the stairs.

I couldn't possibly assemble all the books that the RSOU might have seized but chose not to. As just one example, though, they left Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book* (described in its own blurb as "an instruction manual for radical social change", and containing instructions on makeshift weapons, guerrilla radio, and a plethora of other things which might be considered useful to terrorists) sitting happily on its shelf in the dining room. I own it out of interest in the field of urban survival, and in 'landmark' books in general. Evidently, the searchers either didn't recognise the title (presumably they were working from some kind of limited list of 'unsuitable' publications) or it had been deemed by someone, somewhere, as *not* being useful to a terrorist. But how was any reasonable citizen supposed to differentiate between the books they could own, and the books they could not? Theoretically, given that it contains a chapter on constructing pipe bombs, *Steal This Book* would probably be just as much use to a potential terrorist as *The Anarchist Cookbook*, yet it has been freely available to buy since its publication in 1971, and can still be purchased from all kinds of respectable booksellers in the UK, up to and including *Blackwell's* and *Waterstones*. Did this mean *they* were guilty of the section 58 possession offence by stocking it?

In addition (showing precisely how much value the police had put on the relevance of my eBay purchase history), the miniature, 1:16 scale Pietro Beretta keyring remained with my collection of watches on the landing, and my wooden magic wand was still inside the cardboard tube in the spare room. Both had been listed on DC O'Connor's interview paperwork as 'concerning' purchases, but the officers working on the ground obviously hadn't been instructed to seize them.

My autism meant that I craved logic and sense. It was how my world worked, and precisely why I found comfort in policies, procedures, and rules: I couldn't leave a situation alone if I didn't understand it. However, none of what the police had done made any sense. I was trying to find reason where there was none. Why was there such an enormous amount of inconsistency? What conclusion was I supposed to draw from this? The search warrant permitted attendance by "trained and accredited" search officers only, and PACE confirmed that officers attending should be 'familiar' with conducting searches. They'd been in our house for the equivalent of two working days, and *this* was the grand result?

All evidence pointed towards one thing: once the search warrant had been obtained, the police just wanted to get their foot in the door to have a poke around. It seemed as though each officer had been given free rein to act on their own merit, taking anything they might personally consider unusual, dubious, or otherwise interesting. In some instances they seemed to have taken items without any understanding of what they were: despite me having a weight bench and barbells, they took two heavy Indian clubs (used for weight training), presumably thinking they were weapons. The paperwork listed a "triple-pronged device", neither the search team nor the exhibits officer having the foggiest idea what function the "device" had. It was as though I had been entirely depersonalised—the officers didn't see this as a 'real' home, none of them considered me or my wife as actual human beings, with feelings, legal rights, or in my case, a future.

I started discussing the illogicality of the seizures with Anna, when she suddenly sat bolt upright; it looked as though she had just been shocked. "I've just remembered something."

I felt my heart sink even lower. What now?

"I need to ring the bank."

"You what?"

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She was biting her lip in concentration. “The bank. I was contacted by them when the police were here. They said there was suspicious activity on our account, and they wanted me to ring their customer service team urgently.”

My wife had *never* had this sort of intervention from her bank before now. She was extremely good with finances and was very careful with her money and took appropriate security precautions. I considered the timing of this ‘security check’ to be no mere coincidence—but pulling strings with an international bank needed some serious political clout. If a Secretary of State needed to sign off on surveillance to counter the risks I apparently posed to national security, it made sense that the Security Services would be notified. They *certainly* had the sort of connections and power to dictate how and when banks acted. I considered that Anna might not even be calling the bank itself—the whole customer service ‘call centre’ experience could be an intelligence front. Clearly this investigation ran much deeper, and was far more insidious, than either of us previously thought.

Anna picked up her phone and began to make the call.

“Gentlemen, above everything else on earth, men should cling fast to their right to examine every question; to listen to everyone, no matter who he is; to hear the spoken words and read the written words; because if you shut men’s mouths and paralyze their minds then the greatest truth that is necessary for the welfare of the human race may die.”

Clarence Darrow

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I WAS NOW completely lost for words; I simply couldn't believe this was happening. Everything was going from bad to worse, and the level of calculating malevolence was staggering. The police had no grounds whatsoever to suspect us of financial wrongdoing, which meant they weren't able to arrest us for anything. If they did, it would mean solicitors, objections to the grounds for arrest, meaningless interviews, and probably legal complaints.

Instead, the police had—either themselves or with behind-the-scenes assistance from the Security Services—pulled some strings with our bank. That way, as we held a joint bank account, our finances could be examined in detail, and my wife could essentially be interviewed and questioned about activity on the account without being cautioned. Her answers could be recorded before being passed straight back to the police. It was an ugly, veiled, cloak-and-dagger approach that, had we been able to prove it, would be considered downright unlawful. But this was *precisely* the manner in which the RSOU evidently operated and, as with the foot surveillance, proving they had orchestrated it would be close to impossible.

Interrupting my train of thought, Anna returned downstairs. She was still on the phone and was rifling through a sheaf of paperwork she had retrieved from the office.

“Yep. Yep. It was, yeah. Of course. I'll do that shortly. OK, thanks. Bye.” She rolled her eyes at me. “This is *definitely* something to do with the police.”

I sat down, waiting for the explanation. Anna informed me that upon dialling the number, there was no queuing system. She was immediately connected to someone claiming to be from the ‘Account Maintenance Team’ who, for reasons they did not elaborate on, had suddenly decided activities occurring in our joint bank account were “suspicious”. They began by querying a cash withdrawal of £3,000 from February 2023—almost a year ago. The fact this wasn't flagged at the time spoke volumes about the legitimacy of the enquiry. My wife

explained it was part payment for some building work; the owner of the company had asked for a portion of the overall payment in cash, to enable him to pay his manual workers at the end of the week.

The employee had clearly been instructed to probe further, and asked what the source of the funds was... As if it was any of their business. Anna explained that we had taken out a small loan to cover the cost, which involved all sorts of construction equipment. The project took around two weeks in total.

This answer still failed to satisfy the employee, who then began asking questions about other accounts my wife owned, including one with another bank, in which they could not possibly have had any legitimate interest. However, the employee pushed onwards, demanding to know whether it was ‘usual’ for Anna to transfer small payments between accounts—this is something she had been doing for years, topping up our joint account when bills were higher than expected, and saving what she could here and there. To do so was not illegal, nor should it have been considered suspicious. Yes, she had answered, it was quite normal.

Still not happy, the employee began picking apart other transactions. He named a man who, their records showed, made weekly payments into our joint account; he demanded to know who the account holder was and what the payments were for. She patiently explained that he was her grandfather, and he was paying her back for their weekly online shopping deliveries from Sainsbury’s, each payment amount based on that week’s receipt; sadly, neither of my wife’s grandparents were confident in placing the orders themselves—even bank transfers could be a bit of a stretch for their computer skills.

As I listened, I grew increasingly disgusted—this was a gross overreach and a significant abuse of power. For the second time, Anna had essentially been interviewed, without being cautioned, and with no opportunity for legal advice or representation. My wife has never broken any laws, and for her to be treated in such a manipulative, underhanded way really demonstrated the depths to which the police would stoop. Meanwhile, real, career criminals—drug dealers, rapists, *actual* terrorists—continued to run amok.

I couldn’t believe my ears when Anna went on to explain that the employee now wanted *physical proof* that the transactions were legitimate: he had asked her to send copies of any paperwork or

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receipts that proved the construction work had indeed occurred as she claimed. Without openly saying so, he had suggested her answers might have been dishonest, but the ulterior motive in his request was clear. Providing the paperwork would enable the police to begin probing the loan agreement, the additional bank account, even the company who carried out the work. Having little choice in the matter, she had gathered up a sheaf of documentation, including the original receipt and guarantee, and began photographing the documents to send images via email.

The only thought I could muster is that it's a bloody good job we keep hold of our paperwork.

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced,
where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is
made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress,
rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

Frederick Douglass

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THE NEXT MORNING, I found myself waking up early after a restless sleep. I was far too hot, and my jaw ached. I rubbed it tenderly, remembering that in times of stress it was symptomatic—for me, anyway—to involuntarily clench my jaw to the point my teeth hurt. As my bail date drew closer, the nightmares I suffered became more vivid, more intense. I would wake up throughout the night sweating; every single dream involved the police.

I slipped out of bed and looked at the clock—05:00. I wandered into the study, glancing out of the front window. There was nobody outside, and no vehicles were visible on the road. In the empty car park, the hidden eyes of the Duster stared silently back at me. I decided to do something productive and went fishing in my box of electronic odds and ends. I pulled out one of the common indoor CCTV cameras, a typical ‘plug-and-play’ device used in conjunction with a phone app, the sort designed for checking on your pets. My bail conditions prevented me from deleting any electronic data, but I knew full-well that at least *some* of the micro-SD cards the police hadn’t taken were formatted and empty—I routinely kept them ready for use if required. I slipped a memory card into the camera, found a plug and USB cable, and switched it on. The red light blinked into life, and the camera began its auto-check sequence, spinning and rotating before settling down to the default position.

I went downstairs to fetch the extension cable, returning up to the office. I hooked up the camera, placing it on a box on the windowsill to give it an elevated view. I angled it towards the Duster, and when Anna awoke, we used the app on her phone to check the positioning. The image was perfect, and we commenced recording. For once, at least, the hunters had become the hunted.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. We had both started to eat a little more, and I sent some photographs of the surveillance vehicle through to my solicitor, Sani. He telephoned me that afternoon, expressing his absolute disgust at the behaviour exhibited by the RSOU

officers. I'm normally quite good at detecting platitudes, and I was relieved to hear he sounded genuine. He remarked on the cumulative, negative impact everything must have been having on my mental health, and he reminded me of the police disclosure that described me as 'unstable'. Sani noted that if the police *were* placing any faith in the tip-off, such a description should have indicated caution, particularly regarding the manner in which I should be treated. Sani readily agreed that the methods being employed by the RSOU were underhand and exploitative.

I asked him about the items the police hadn't seized, and he seemed nonchalant in his reply.

"If they're legal to own, keep hold of them." That hadn't stopped them the first time, I thought wryly.

I then expressed worries about something that was causing me increasing concern: what if the police 'realised' they had 'forgotten' the items, and chose to return, kicking my front door in to retrieve them? Whilst Sani didn't consider this to be outside the realms of possibility, he thought it was unlikely. However, I wasn't known for my optimism, and Sani couldn't provide any more of an explanation for them being left behind than those I had already contemplated.

The topic of conversation moved onto the Duster, and Sani's immediate thoughts were identical to my own. "They do this with drug dealers all the time. They're desperate to remand them into custody, but they also want the bigger fish. So, they grant the dealer bail, hoping they'll lead police to higher-level dealers or other criminal associates once they think the police are no longer watching."

I frowned at this. If that was the case, surveillance was basically being routinely misused. Surely, given its invasive nature, it wouldn't be authorised in the vague 'hope' the subject *might* commit crime. "So, the police are... what, expecting me to do something?"

"I'd imagine so. They seem to suspect you're up to something, so it would make sense for them to watch you, to see what you do next."

"But I don't do *anything*, ever. I mind my own business at home. I don't go out; I don't socialise with people. I'm just a normal, private bloke who minds his own business."

"Exactly. So don't worry about it. They haven't got the resources to keep up the surveillance forever. I imagine in a day or two it'll just drop off, and the car will disappear."

Simply accepting this conduct as ‘normal’ didn’t seem morally right, and I began to vocalise my frustration at the way I was being treated. I had never harmed anyone, nor had I ever *threatened* to harm anyone. I had worked all my life. Yet I was the focus of an enormous anti-terrorist operation which must have, so far, cost the taxpayer hundreds of thousands of pounds. By the time matters reached court, the costs could be in excess of millions. So far, the RSOU had broken more laws than I apparently had, and it seemed they posed a greater risk to the public than I did. Sani continued, trying to reassure me.

“Look, I don’t think you’re a criminal. You’re guilty of collecting things, yes. I also think you’re guilty of hoarding. But do I think you’re a criminal? No, not at all.”

We ended the call, his words having given me some reassurance, although I knew that the voice of one man alone would easily be drowned out by the collective voices of all the police forces in our region. But then again, as Plato had written: “The empty vessel makes the loudest sound.”

I reflected on my struggles with depression and how it affected me. I never really hated myself without reason, there was at least *some* semblance of logic to my self-loathing. If I had to prioritise things, I would have said that I struggled with my surroundings first, and then hated my reactions to them second. I constantly felt forced to fit in to performative roles that felt abnormal. Surviving in society was a monotonous, never-ending battle; if you weren’t paying money to exist, you were validating your worth through over-exaggerated displays of conformity. You could never be left alone any more; you always had to be visible, available and ‘online’. Anyone who valued their privacy was increasingly seen as ‘antisocial’, or just plain weird.

The world was a strange, cruel place, where injustice always seemed to prevail. Huge corporations razed the rainforests and recklessly polluted the seas whilst reaping unimaginable profits. Bankers gave themselves indescribable bonuses whilst tens of thousands lived in poverty. Governments shamelessly sold their mountains of industrial and domestic waste to developing nations for pennies, whilst unlawfully eradicating their political and economic opponents with seemingly unlimited budgets. Elsewhere, robbers, rapists, and murderers frequently evaded justice in our flawed and broken courts, or worse, walked straight out of open prisons.

Injustice was even prevalent on much more local levels. Water companies pumped raw sewage into freshwater rivers, accepting the risk of mediocre fines if they were caught. One of England's Police and Crime Commissioners had been caught speeding in two different luxury vehicles on five separate occasions over twelve weeks, once driving at 40mph in a 30mph zone. At court, the Commissioner received only a six-month ban and no penalty points. But less than a year later, one man *not* connected with the police service would receive a sentence twice as harsh for a much lesser offence—a twelve-month ban and three penalty points for a single instance of driving at 36mph in a 30mph zone.

Such travesties of injustice were occurring on an almost daily basis, oversaturating our culture to the extent that many people become blind to them. Yet I had diligently worked and paid taxes since my eighteenth birthday—for over twenty years I had never taken *anything* from the state; I had only ever contributed. I had put my life on the line as a decorated, front-line police officer for over a decade. And now the chances were high that I would receive a custodial sentence higher than many criminals would ever see—and I had never hurt anyone. I couldn't rid myself of the nagging feeling that I had *always* been on the outside of society.

It was at that point I realised: what I resented most wasn't just my circumstances, but something deeper, and more fundamental to who I was—my autism.

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AT HALF PAST six the following morning, our house was in darkness. Everyone slept while the newly positioned CCTV camera kept a vigilant watch. Concealed by the shadows outside, a shaven-headed white man in casual clothes walked around the corner from the main road. He strolled quickly up to the Duster, unlocking it with a key fob. He climbed into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut. Starting the engine, he reversed out of the space and drove the vehicle back in the direction from which he had come.

A couple of minutes later, the man returned, this time driving a dark Vauxhall Zafira. He parked it in the exact same spot, climbed out, locked it with a fob, and walked away.

The camera remained silent, ever watchful.

Somewhere, the birds began to sing.

“Things in our country run in spite of government,
not by aid of it.”

Will Rogers

68

I WOKE UP at around 07:30, and a gut feeling told me something had changed. I looked out the window, spotting that the Dacia Duster had been exchanged for a dark-coloured Vauxhall Zafira. Like the Duster, the Zafira had tinted rear windows.

It was obviously a replacement surveillance vehicle, so I was in no particular hurry to check it out. After a meagre breakfast, I threw on some clothes and went to have a look. It was the Tourer edition of the Zafira, sporting a 65-plate registration. This time, the rear windows were almost solid black instead of a dark smoked tint, and the entire car was covered in a thin film of dirt. I spent a few moments pondering how I could see through the heavy tint. One of the problems with autistic people is that I *guarantee* they'll find a way around 99% of obstructions you place in their path... characteristically, I was an excellent problem-solver.

Darting back home, I dug out one of the brightest torches I owned, an Olight Warrior X3, which I kept charged and ready for use. I picked up a bottle of glass cleaner and a micro-fibre cloth, and wandered back to the car, with the items tucked under my arm.

One quick polish of the windows later, I cupped my face up against the Zafira's glass, holding the illuminated torch in my mouth. I could now see through the window. Thrown over the back seats were a photographer's tripod, an olive-green sleeping bag, and some surveillance logs, showing a list of timings scrawled on white A4 notepads in black ink.

I moved to examine the front of the vehicle, observing the familiar grey wire running alongside the centre armrest and console area. Yet again, there was a piece of fabric conveniently dropped over the cup holder to conceal a piece of equipment, and the wire ran to a small handheld control unit which had been carelessly left in full view near the cigarette sockets. The control unit contained a series of directional buttons; hazarding a guess, it was the control panel to operative the pan-tilt-zoom functions of the hidden cameras.

I moved around to the front, discovering the rear-view mirror was identical to that of the Duster; both were much thicker than the factory-fitted mirrors. Again, two 1cm-diameter holes had been drilled into the front, one on each side of the mounting stalk, and both had dark lenses fitted. A familiar grey wire was visible protruding from the top of the mirror, disappearing under the fabric of the headliner. Clearly these vehicles had all been part of a similar installation, probably using a bulk purchase of surveillance equipment from an approved government supplier.

But this vehicle had no roof rack. *Where were the cameras?* I examined the light cluster and fuel cap, finding nothing. Then I spotted them: the cameras were hidden in the radio aerial. To give the RSOU some credit, this was a much more covert installation. Perhaps, realising I'd spotted the Duster, they had decided to replace it with something less conspicuous. Which would have been fine, except they'd forgotten to take the tripod and sleeping bag off the back seat. And forgotten to remove the surveillance logs. And forgotten to hide the control pad.

I examined the aerial closely. At the top were two tiny, drilled holes, no more than 1.5mm in diameter. The aerial appeared to be a single fitted unit, so the presence of the control panel in the centre console suggested there were tiny micro-electronic mechanisms concealed inside the head of the aerial, which allowed the camera inside to rotate and zoom. I had to admit, it was fairly impressive; the holes were too high up to be blocked by dirt, too small to generate condensation, and certainly too subtle to be spotted by anyone casually walking past.

I wondered what else I could find, and began to examine the rear of the vehicle. The rear windscreen appeared to be a solid tint, and with the exception of a (rather strange) single screw in the left-hand side of the exterior brake light strip, I couldn't find anything. Hiding camera lenses in the dead centre of a crosshead screw was old technology, but I couldn't see anything that indicated the screw was hiding a lens. However, a second pinhole in the aerial faced the rear, so I wondered if the more covert setup allowed for just three directions of observation rather than four.

I took some more photos and went back home, the Zafira watching my every step. I wondered whether, when the police watched the

footage back, the RSOU officers would realise their plans had been foiled within an hour of the vehicle being placed. I also wondered how many times individuals under police surveillance had spotted their vehicles.

I dropped Sani another email, updating him that the car had been swapped over. There was little doubt that, in their sleek, unsigned office building in the business park just off the motorway, the RSOU officers would soon know I was onto them. But what would they do next? It was a frightening thought.

Now seemed as good a time as any to search for bugs or audio transmitting devices. I began the methodical process of examining the interior of the house. When it comes to audio surveillance, if the police have the time to choose, they'll install devices in locations most likely to receive frequent use and conversation; key areas are the living room and bedroom. Again, if they have the time, the installation will be somewhere that is rarely touched or inspected by the occupant(s). The interior of electrical sockets and the cavernous spaces inside sofas both offer ample room for such a project. Light fittings within the ceiling also provide a generous amount of space. However, installing multiple devices is risky: the more there are, the greater the chance of discovery. I had even read a news article last year about the development of items for this specific purpose—the reporter in this case had documented the development of a device disguised like a pen. In theory, a government operative could dress up as a Royal Mail delivery person, approach your front door to post a letter or some leaflets, and discreetly fire the ‘pen’ through your letterbox. It contained an almost microscopic dart which would embed itself deep into your carpet, transmitting audio from inside the house to a receiver somewhere on the streets nearby. Having previously worked at a police station where the RSOU kept some of their covert vehicles and equipment, I knew this wasn't beyond the realms of possibility; I had once discovered a Royal Mail outfit lodged with some of their gear.

I started by removing all the sofa covers. Now seemed as good a time as any to wash them, so after feeling around each seam, I shoved them into the washing machine. I returned to the sofa, examining the foam for any slits where something could have been inserted. Nothing. I removed everything and vacuumed away any dust and dog hair, sliding my fingers in the crevices down the side and rear. Still nothing...

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

not even a coin. Frowning, I gently flipped the sofa over. I vacuumed underneath it, then inspected the fabric covering the underside. In theory, someone could have prised the staples off, accessed the void, and then re-stapled it. However, I couldn't see any old staple holes, so if there *was* something concealed within the sofa itself, the installer was good at their craft. However, given they had left so many potential items of interest behind, I doubted the RSOU techs would be professional enough to do such a clean install; compared to the slick city boys of the Security Services, the RSOU were probably regarded as a bunch of country farmers, leaving huge clods of proverbial mud in their wake.

I put the sofa back together and removed the spotlights from the ceiling. I reached into the void with my fingers, feeling around. Nothing. I examined the fittings carefully. Still nothing. Frowning, I slipped the pictures off the walls, examining the frames. Nope. I eyed the double socket with suspicion, each hole now covered with Blu Tack. I went to the fuse box, flicking off the power. Then, I unscrewed the cover and had a look inside... There was nothing obvious. I put the cover back on and checked behind the TV, finding nothing of interest.

I stopped and looked around me. The number of hiding places were almost endless. There was the fireplace, the piano, the curtain pole, the plant pots, the mirror... Even doing an amateur sweep would take hours and wouldn't guarantee finding anything.

Frustrated, I sat on the sofa. There were so many unanswered questions, but the one I really wanted an answer for was what *had* they used the Gerber Multipliers for?

By this point, anything seemed possible.



Figure 29: The Dacia Duster in situ.



Figure 30: The hidden camera lens in the Duster's roof rack.



Figure 31: The Vauxhall Zafira in situ. (The quality parking award goes to...)



Figure 32: A camera lens in the aerial of the Zafira.

69

AS EACH DAY passed, my mood changed. Sometimes it was up, other times it was down. Most of the time, I was just exhausted. I spent my nights tossing and turning, often falling asleep only to wake a few hours later, having experienced nightmares so real, so vivid, I knew there was no possible escape.

In one, I returned to the police station to answer my bail. A member of staff told me to wait in a reception area, and left me there, completely alone, for over an hour. I couldn't find anyone to speak to, and when I eventually gave up and left, I was jumped on by a group of officers in tactical gear. They had been hiding nearby; the RSOU officers had engineered my leaving the station in order to justify presenting grounds to remand me.

In another nightmare, I was kept handcuffed, my arms twisted behind my back, my wrists encased in cold, hard steel. I was being detained under terrorism legislation, meaning my imprisonment was extended to several days. The officers refused to unshackle my hands in my cell, laughing as they forced me to kneel down and eat from a bowl on the floor as though I were a dog.

I had begun sleeping in the daytime while Anna was at work, hoping to catch up with my rest. At some points I remained comatose for several hours. Not that it made me feel any better in the long run—the clock continued to slowly tick down in the background. The reality of my life was that it had been transformed into a nightmare I might not wake up from: I was all too conscious of the fact I could just walk back into the police station and never walk out again. Just the thought of it filled me with dread. These people were capable of anything.

While I suffered with my disrupted sleep, the Zafira didn't last long. It was quietly swapped over at 06:30 two days later—oddly, the Duster returned in its place. By now, it must have been starkly apparent to the RSOU officers that I was aware of the surveillance, so what was the purpose of keeping it up? Was it just bare-faced intimidation? I wondered whether, once the subject was aware they

were being watched, surveillance became legally unjustifiable, given that the chances of catching anything were reduced to practically zero.

Meanwhile, Anna booked her Mini in for an MOT at the garage down the road. When she took it in two days later, she discreetly asked the staff at the front desk whether they could check for signs of tracking, bugging or any other third-party interference. To her surprise, they didn't bat an eyelid—clearly such requests were more common than I thought.

I remained at home and contemplated what to do with my job. It was a role that I loved, and my manager had been one of the most supportive work colleagues I had ever met. Having settled into the environment, for the first time in a very long time, I felt truly lucky. After so many negative experiences, things had finally started coming together for me. I had made good friends. I was on the verge of promotion. I was exercising my brain. I was surrounded by like-minded people who strived to work together to achieve common goals. I had actual purpose, and I loved it. My job was what I needed to thrive, to survive. However, I'd only been there a few months; I was still on probation. I knew that the RSOU's tactical decision to arrest me at my workplace risked dire consequences for me.

I thought about the issues at hand. I was on bail for three months, which—Sani had warned me—the police could revoke any time they saw fit. Given the low standards the RSOU appeared to work to, justification in doing so would probably amount to no more than having a slow day at the office. As I was under 24-hour surveillance at home, this increased the risk of my being arrested at work. If that happened, in theory, the police would be permitted to search my workplace, *again*. In broad strokes, I felt it was unfair to subject my manager to this kind of treatment, which was tantamount to harassment. You can't run a department or team effectively when counter-terrorist police keep invading the place.

Our lives were clearly going to fall apart no matter what happened. I loved Anna with all my heart, and I wanted to do my best to shield her from the circus I had unwittingly invited to town. If I sold my Toyota, that would generate enough money to cover six weeks' wages. I also had an ongoing civil case which I could try to advance and resolve earlier than I ideally wanted. It might mean accepting a settlement of much lesser value than I would otherwise be entitled to,

but that should cover a year's worth of wages, at least. In the meantime, I figured I could try and sell as many of my remaining possessions as possible. Except that wasn't as simple as I first thought, because the police had my mobile phone and digital camera.

Mobile phones have become so integrated with modern society that we now struggle to function without them. I couldn't log into Gmail, eBay or Amazon, because they all required two-step verification—for this, I needed physical access to my phone. I couldn't create new accounts either, for the same reason. Of course, I could use the phone DC Ainsworth had given me, which was no doubt mirroring everything I did, storing and sharing data. What would happen if the police saw me attempting to register a new email account? I had no doubt that they'd simply swoop straight back in and arrest me again.

I felt a jolt of pain, and suddenly found myself scowling and clenching my jaw. What was I supposed to do? If modern society were not so reliant upon technology, I would at least stand half a chance of preparing my wife for my departure. Technology had indeed become such a key part of our lives that it had become a crutch, a malignant cancer that posed serious risk to the health and stability of the host if it were ever to be removed. I contemplated that last thought. Perhaps I had something in common with the Unabomber after all. I'd have swapped my right arm for a remote cabin in the woods, far away from the police, from civilisation, from everything.

So, with an extraordinarily heavy heart, I made the decision to quit my job. I just couldn't return—partly out of sheer embarrassment, partly because I couldn't face being asked probing questions every day, and partly because the bail conditions I had been given made it impossible for me to do my job. How could *anyone* survive in the workplace when they were forbidden from deleting digital data? Every single backspace, every deleted email, every over-written file: all were legally forbidden, and for what purpose? To what end? I would either end up being dismissed or arrested for breaching my bail conditions.

On top of that, I couldn't very well drive to and from work without my driving licence. How was I supposed to explain things if I got stopped? *Sorry officer, your colleagues unlawfully seized my licence whilst executing a search warrant.* I considered that perhaps the police had deliberately made it impossible for me to continue working. With no ID, they were pushing me out of society, erasing me from existence.

For the first time in my working life, my manager quite literally pleaded with me not to leave. He offered me anything within his power which would enable, or convince, me to stay, even promising to shoulder the burden of any gossip, whispers, or accusations. My heart sank just listening to his voice. He told me how I had made such an incredible difference to the team, how I had brought boundless enthusiasm and positivity to the workplace, how I was the proudest moment of his career to date. It had taken me years to find a position like this, and now it was being snatched away... all for nothing.

I told him in no uncertain terms that whilst I would always be grateful for everything that he had done for me, he needed to step back. I had painful memories of the public outrage that arose following my dismissal, and I didn't want him to end up facing his own problems simply by associating with me. I had the greatest respect for him, and I needed, somehow, for him to distance himself. It felt like no matter what I did, I was a poison to everyone around me.

I thanked my manager for his kind words, and told him there was nothing he could do to convince me otherwise. In a final offer, he promised to keep my position vacant until my bail date had passed. If something happened to me, he would fill my position, otherwise, my return would be welcomed with open arms. Little did he know, it would never be a case of *if*, but *when*.

I ended the call with a heavy heart, wishing I had the guts to tell him that in nearly 25 years of employment, it was working for him which had finally made me feel truly valued.

The following day, I made enquiries about applying for Jobseeker's Allowance. It would be a pittance, but it was better than nothing. However, I found that I wasn't even able to complete the application, as having a valid form of physical, photographic ID was an essential requirement... So much for civil liberties and human rights. I felt like the police had intentionally trapped me, creating an impossible situation which only had one way out.

So, as I began the process of closing everything down, preparing for the inevitable, I felt as though my life had reached its last chapter. It finally felt like the beginning of the end.

“I am really very, very tired of everything—more than tired.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

70

THE EARLY HOURS of 29 January 2024 were dark and frosty. There was a distinct nip in the air, the kind of cold that punctured your lungs and left evidence of your exhalations hanging as though pieces of your soul had escaped, slowly freezing in the damp air.

At 06:30, a dark-coloured people carrier drove slowly past our house. The brake lights came on in the darkness as the driver slowed, indicating left and pulling over several doors further down. A moment later, a familiar-looking, shaven-headed white man in casual clothing hopped out. Sticking his hands in his pockets to shield them from the bitter cold, the man casually strolled back up the road towards our home, keeping his head down.

Pressing a key in his jacket pocket, he unlocked the Duster, the hazard lights acknowledging receipt of the electronic signal with an obedient double-flash. Removing a cheap plastic scraper from the driver's door pocket, he began noisily removing the accumulation of frost from the front windows. After only a few minutes of hard work, he climbed into the driver's seat, twiddling with the heating controls. A moment later he clunked the car into reverse, slowly backing out of the space. With the headlights on full beam, he stopped momentarily, waiting for the interior of the vehicle's heavily misted windscreen to clear.

I stood watching him from the shadows. If he had seen me, his body language remained neutral, which suggested he remained oblivious to my presence. He slipped the Duster into gear and pulled onto the road, turning left, accelerating away into the night.

Nobody returned. The surveillance had, it seemed, finally been called off.

“We hang the petty thieves and
appoint the great ones to public office.”

*Aesop**

* Probably misattributed, and he certainly wouldn't have said it in English.

71

AS PART OF my efforts at understanding the situation I was in, I began looking online for information about the RSOU. I found a ‘briefing document’ which looked like it had been prepared for an incoming Police and Crime Commissioner in 2020, and the document opened with the RSOU’s boldly worded mission statement:

“To identify, disrupt and prosecute those individuals or groups causing the most harm to our communities.”

Reading those words reinforced every negative feeling I had experienced and accumulated to date. How had I become a viable target? Where was the evidence that I caused *any* harm, let alone the *most* harm, to the community in which I lived? Only last year I reported seeing someone carrying a shotgun into a house. Nothing ever happened. I also reported a local drug-dealer, and obtained some excellent photos of him exchanging bags of white powder for £20 notes. Nobody in the police cared; they never asked for the images. Sometimes a large gang of men riding stolen motorcycles with no number plates would blast through red traffic lights and veer over footpaths through a park, risking collisions with the frail, elderly residents of the nearby care home. I’d never seen the police after them.

Anyway, the briefing document, authored by a Deputy Chief Constable, explained that the RSOU was responsible for tackling “organised crime groups involved in drugs and firearms supply, cybercrime, human trafficking and modern slavery and money laundering.” I don’t doubt that they’re serious crimes, but where did owning paintball markers, buying a magic wand, and collecting old books fall into such categories?

The document claimed that the RSOU was “the largest police collaboration in the country” and boasted that it had “an exceptional reputation” being “held up nationally as the blueprint for collaboration”. I found that staggering. The Unit had almost 1,000 staff, and an annual budget in excess of £30 million.

A bit more digging led me to a second briefing document, this one produced for 2021. Whilst much of the material was the same, I noted the RSOU's budget had crept up to £34 million in the twelve months that had passed. A newly inserted page concerning the RSOU's 'Counter Terrorism' team proclaimed they pursued "those intent on terrorist activity, identifying and disrupting them before they can cause significant harm." This remit finally unveiled the picture they were so desperately trying to paint. There was no evidence I had ever even *contemplated* conducting terrorist activity, never mind being "intent" on it. Consequently, that meant there was never any kind of risk or threat of "significant harm". No wonder they'd needed to falsify my arrests; the police didn't want their precarious house of cards to collapse and cause regional—or worse, national—embarrassment.

Despite all of the overt propaganda, I also noted that the RSOU now had its own Legal Services department, which seemed an interesting development. Why would that be considered a financial necessity, if all of their actions were above board and lawful?

I answered my own question when I discovered a news article, published only several months before my arrest, announcing that inspectors from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services had publicly branded the RSOU as "inadequate". They had obviously seen straight through the Unit's strategic PR hogwash, and the official report acknowledged a distinct lack of experience, skills, and training among the RSOU's investigators, concluding the organisation "lacked co-ordinating process". The Inspectorate investigators also identified several concerns which prevented the RSOU from being "effective and efficient"—cryptically, it was reported such concerns arose as the "result of managerial decisions". The report also suggested there was internal bickering and squabbling over funding, as each force contributed a different budgetary amount depending on the number of staff they had seconded to the Unit.

Even though my arrest had come months after the publication of such damning comments, the RSOU's lack of experience, skills and training were still evident and deeply relevant, and it was abundantly clear that there was still an *enormous* failure in coordination, evidenced by the scattered, haphazard approach the officers had taken to every aspect of the investigation behind Operation Scuppered.

The report also briefly mentioned a review of the RSOU’s “high profile” cases, and this is where I strongly suspected I would suffer the most. I’d already experienced the negative impact of exposure to the media following my dismissal from the police, finding myself rejected for countless jobs even though I’d committed no crime, suffering verbal accusations, hate mail, protests, being shunned by my colleagues and neighbours, and becoming the subject of a national social media campaign to have me fired from the one low-paid role I was finally able to obtain. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Given the time and resources that had been poured into Operation Scuppered, I strongly suspected my arrest would be trumpeted as another successful “high profile” investigation, promoted for political benefit. It was obvious the RSOU were in desperate need of positive publicity following their recent battering by the Inspectorate. Despite being slated for their continual emphasis on gun crime (presumably because the lack of general defences meant it provided ‘easy win’ cases), I had found myself targeted under the loose-fitting umbrella of firearms first, and *then* terrorism. What better way to announce another victory in the RSOU’s battle against social evil by releasing my mugshot, and perhaps a short body-cam clip of my arrest for good measure, to the bloodhounds of the press?

My suspicions were not entirely unfounded, as it seemed senior staff within the Unit were quick to exploit those who, for whatever reason, were unlucky enough to find themselves on the RSOU radar. The first ‘success’ story from the 2020 briefing document involved a woman who had been jailed for three years for stealing from pensioners in a care home. Whilst any crime against the vulnerable is abhorrent, they seemed to have lost sight of the fact that the woman’s sentencing occurred *seventeen years ago*. Promoting a two-decades-old offence as a triumph in the world of “serious and organised crime” was woeful, but the narrative took a sinister turn when the RSOU boasted they had “revisited” the woman ten years later, who had (after their ‘revisit’) spontaneously “agreed” to forfeit her two pensions worth £13,000. Was this further evidence of the Unit’s routine modus operandi...? Threats, coercion, and psychological pressure?

Elsewhere, one of the Unit’s most recent terrorism cases had resulted in a victoriously worded press release, which declared that the RSOU had arrested and charged a man described as a “dangerous

individual”, reporting that he had been “planning a terrorist attack” in which “lives could have been lost” (emphasis added). Presumably one of the best, if not only, pieces of evidence the Unit had managed to gather was photographed and released to the media in order to support their glamorous claims of stepping in to prevent “potentially deadly actions”: it was an image of a cheap automotive glass hammer, which was apparently going to be used to break a shop window.

Reading on, it became clear the RSOU’s claims of saving lives were based on a purely speculative premise: if the *hypothetical* attack had gone ahead, the *hypothetical* lives of *hypothetical* emergency workers who rushed to the *hypothetical* scene could have been put at *hypothetical* risk, and they could have *hypothetically* died.* The same commanding officer who was overseeing Operation Scuppered (and was thus responsible for my particular fate) had provided some of the extravagantly worded quotes for that overblown press release; it looked to just be pomp for promotion. It cannot be denied: serious crime is sensational media fodder, and one or two photographs lured the public more than any narrative. As the saying goes, *a picture paints a thousand words*, but to those with any inkling of common sense, a photograph of a glass hammer was evidence scraped from the very bottom of the barrel.

In light of the Unit’s constant promulgation, things finally started to make a bit more sense. The RSOU had seized a staggering number of wholly irrelevant and completely legal items from my home, including my collection of folding pocket knives. I suspected that deep inside the RSOU’s secretive, lakeside office building, a cluster of carefully arranged photographs would be taken to help provide proof of their stupid narrative that I posed some kind of threat to the public. I envisaged a couple of my pocket knives positioned next to my GoPro camera, alongside my lock-picking set, my .177 air rifle, and the canister of Temporary Witness Identification spray. At a glance, it might look like an assassin’s toolkit. My police career would be used to generate additional, sinister conclusions. Thus, the RSOU could succeed in painting an unpleasant picture, despite each item being (i) lawfully owned, and (ii) for completely unrelated purposes.

* Hypothetically, of course.

PART 3: CONFRONTING THE ABYSS

Such an effect could be created from the most innocuous of items. It would be no different from the police photographing a steak knife from your kitchen next to the £80 cash kept in your wallet and a handful of paracetamol capsules: by design, it becomes insinuated that you are involved in dealing drugs. Like everything else the Unit did, it would be manipulative, underhand, and exploitative. The RSOU's commanding officers were the worst kind of snake-oil salesmen, selling cures for the very same fears they were responsible for drumming up.

Based on my own experiences and the principle of the sunk cost fallacy, I considered it highly unlikely that the RSOU would back down on *any* element of either the investigation or my prosecution. In fact, I believed they would double down, pushing forward to ensure I was charged amidst a flurry of publicity and positive spin. Crucially, I noticed that my bail date, the maximum time permitted, had been set for only two weeks before polling day for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. Whilst this may have been just coincidence, any suggestion of an ulterior motive became much more substantial when I found out my local PCC had recently become the "Regional Lead" for the RSOU's fight against serious and organised crime—how this worked alongside the oath of impartiality all PCCs had to swear was another mystery. So, in lieu of any other hot topics, had my arrest been organised in advance for political gain? Was my public crucifixion being prepared to increase the chances of the PCC's re-election? *Look what the Unit has achieved since I became Regional Lead.*

Whatever happened to me, it would reinforce the 'decision' made by Sylvester Dennis and his colleagues during my misconduct hearing seven years earlier, a decision which was demonstrably based on an orchestrated cover-up of relevant evidence. My being charged as a result of the RSOU's biased and blinkered investigation would only serve to drown out my voice even more. It seemed that almost everyone had some profit to gain from my manufactured demise, remaining completely indifferent to the consequences I would suffer. The vultures were circling, waiting to swoop in to begin pecking away at my still-breathing flesh.

The most pertinent question was this: What chance did one autistic man have against an army of 1,000 police officers and staff, a team of legal professionals and a budget exceeding £34 million?

“If detectives aren’t able really to detect anything,
illusion of their success is all that is necessary.”

Charles Fort
The Book of the Damned

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ON 16 FEBRUARY, I had a brief telephone consultation with my GP. I had been waiting several weeks for the appointment, such is the pressure heaped upon our ever-struggling NHS.

By this point I had been on bail almost a month, and in their assurances of investigating fairly, the detectives had promised to review my medical records. As such, I asked my GP to determine whether the police had visited the surgery in person or examined my records electronically—unsurprisingly, there was no indication that they had done so, or even made an attempt to carry out the task.

I had been trying to hold myself together for so long, and I had been through this routine so many times before: trying to explain the unexplainable, to fathom the unfathomable, then listening to the stunned silence of my audience as they tried to process something which ran entirely contrary to their deep-rooted social beliefs. The usual response, after a lengthy pause, was a sceptical comment immediately followed by a question: *They can't do that... can they?*

My doctor listened quietly as I gradually lost my eloquence, my speech devolving into frantic babbling. I tried to explain how I had been deliberately arrested in front of my work colleagues, how the officers lied to me about the warrant having been executed, listening to them deny any knowledge of the men who were poring through my phone in the car park, the sweltering heat of the interview room, the underhand method by which I was denied food in custody, the repeated refusals to tell me why I was having 360-degree photographs of my body and multiple prints of my feet taken, the police surveillance cameras hidden innocuously in vehicles, staring into my living room... There was just too much for me to cope with, and it didn't take long before the floodgates opened. I broke down in tears, sobbing and gasping for air.

My GP remained silent until I had finished speaking, and after a pause, his only words were “I am so sorry that this has happened to you.”

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It was the first time I had heard anything even close to an apology from anyone, and I could feel the sincerity behind his voice—his words sounded authentic and had been provided in lieu of any other meaningful input. After all, what else was there to say? I felt like my entire adult life had been stained by the police service, and I had been left alone to suffer the consequences of actions taken by others time and time again. It pained me beyond belief to acknowledge that my torment and hardship would probably continue for a very long time to come... if I let it.

My doctor told me to come and see him in person, and promptly made an appointment in a few days' time which I suspect, given that he scheduled it for 12:00, meant he was foregoing his lunch break to speak with me. I promised I would attend and hung up the phone, biting my lip. I wanted to go, but what was I supposed to say? I couldn't tell him the truth—that I felt my life was over, that I knew deep in my heart the police would stop at nothing. I knew that *any* expression of suicidal thoughts risked me being detained under the same Mental Health Act I had used to detain so many people in the past. I would be delivered directly into the jaws of the same government-sponsored systems which were planning to crush me. How was my doctor supposed to help the helpless?

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IN LATE FEBRUARY, a call from my solicitor, Sani, brought unsettling news. He explained that a Detective Sergeant from the RSOU had recently been in touch with him, complaining that one of the laptop passwords I provided during my interview didn't work. However, what began as a routine message had suddenly taken an ominous turn, as the Sergeant made a vaguely threatening reference to my non-compliance with a section 49 notice.*

I had not, at *any* point, been issued with a section 49 notice. Therefore, this hinted at a troubling pattern that was emerging—one of deliberate coercion and manipulation being employed by the RSOU officers. I assumed that, because there were so many staff involved, if the Unit's actions were ever challenged, they would make ample use of plausible deniability: *My Lord, with such a large team, some confusion was bound to arise; it's only fair that any officer accused of wrongdoing should be given the benefit of the doubt.*

Alternatively, I supposed, in making his incorrect assertion, the Detective Sergeant's actions could also be a form of diffusion of responsibility, which occurs when individuals in a group feel less accountable for their actions due to the collective, unified nature of the group. However, I wryly observed that if even if this rapidly growing list of 'errors' were to be considered as such, then it was beyond coincidence that every 'mistake' the RSOU officers made was to *their* benefit, not mine.

Angered by this demonstration of yet another dishonest and manipulative approach, I told Sani to tell the DS to go and fuck

* The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 provides the bulk of legal powers relating to surveillance, interception of communications, and encryption. The police are entitled to issue a section 49 notice to a suspect if they hold reasonable grounds for believing that (i) an electronic item contains evidence which relates to an offence, and (ii) they are unable to access the data storage of that item due to presentation of a PIN code, password, or some other security mechanism. Failure to comply with a notice is a criminal offence with a maximum of two years' imprisonment.

himself.* This was just another instance of police overreach in an increasingly long catalogue of abuses.

Later that afternoon, I plucked up the courage to try logging into my emails and my online cloud storage. I wanted to try to pick up some clues, to find out what the RSOU investigators had been doing while I had been on bail. It was a course of action I had refrained from taking for over a month, lest it permit the police to concoct another spurious reason to come and arrest me. What I found was deeply disturbing, and—like most of the other things the RSOU had done—appeared to be in contravention of the law.

First, I discovered that the RSOU investigators had connected my mobile phone to the live data network post-seizure. I was arrested at 07:08 on 23 January, however my WhatsApp account was last seen ‘online’ around lunchtime the following day, 24 January. Connecting a phone to the cellular network obviously permits the phone to receive incoming messages, emails and notifications which could not be delivered whilst the phone was either turned off or in flight mode.

Legally, as the ‘new’ messages had been delivered *after* the police seized my phone, this classified as interception of communications. This requires a warrant, first approved by an independent Judicial Commissioner from the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office, and then further authorisation is needed from a Secretary of State. I was extremely dubious that such approval had been sought, and suspected the RSOU would claim another ‘honest’ mistake.

Second, I discovered that the investigators had used my email account to request bulk data downloads from Google and Meta. This data can only be supplied to the account holder, who needs to pass the appropriate security and identification checks by logging in. If a third-party agency wants the information, the correct way to obtain it would be to apply for a warrant, which would then be legally served on Google and/or Meta. However, the RSOU investigators had circumvented this procedure, in essence ‘pretending’ to be me when submitting their request for the data.

Third, Google servers had (rightly) marked the download request as suspicious, because it originated from a computer and network connection I had never used before. Consequently, the download had

* I presume he used some artistic licence when passing the message on.

been blocked. To try to circumvent this, the RSOU investigators had attempted to change the security settings of my Google account. A number of automated emails had been sent warning me about this, which the investigators had read (proving further interception of communications) but had not deleted.

The bulk data download itself was enormous, and the RSOU investigators had requested every shred of data imaginable, despite much of this not applying to the offence of ‘possession of a section 1 firearm’. They downloaded my exercise and heart-rate data from Google Fit, they downloaded the YouTube videos I had uploaded of my motorcycle rides, they downloaded my Google Maps contributions and corrections as well as my reviews for local businesses, and they downloaded academic and educational data from Google Class. The evidence that the police were not only continuing, but extending, their fishing trip was now indisputable.

Fourth, I found out that the RSOU investigators had obviously trawled my Google account looking for links to cloud storage providers. I have a free Dropbox account which I hadn’t used for years, and records showed that the investigators had tried to log into it. They were unsuccessful, and so used an automatically generated security code, sent to my Google email, to gain access. These emails had (again) been read, but not deleted.

In essence, the RSOU investigators were impersonating me. This wouldn’t be permitted when dealing with a financial institution, so why was it considered acceptable when interacting with a digital one? The automated systems didn’t know my account was being used for specific purposes without my consent, and the information would not have been provided had this information come to light. Whilst I had provided my Google password during my first interview, the investigators didn’t tell me what they intended to use it for, nor was there any implied consent indicating they were entitled to step so widely outside of the tight legal boundaries in which they should have been operating.

Finally, I looked at the access history on my Google Drive. Despite having thousands of files (many of which were subject to legal privilege due to the ongoing civil case I’d instigated some time ago) the police had immediately gone straight to two folders.

Where had they gone?

The Centrex Policeman, and my book manuscript *Rotten to the Core*. At least some things were finally starting to become clear.

There were no words to describe the experience I was enduring. I could imagine no greater invasion of privacy, supported by a combination of either malicious or selectively interpreted information. Something needed to be done, if not for me then for the sake of others like me who might find themselves in a similar position.

I began to compose a formal letter of complaint about the actions of the RSOU. In support, I produced a 35-page document which contained photographs, CCTV stills, and extracts from copy police documents and relevant legislation. My allegations were firm and clear: I had been unlawfully imprisoned, I had been physically assaulted, I had been deliberately falsely arrested, I had been denied food, biometric data had been wrongfully taken from me in custody, a significant amount of my property had, for all intents and purposes, been stolen, and my legal rights had been breached.

The following day, I posted the letters to the complaints department of each police force which made up the RSOU, along with the Independent Office for Police Conduct, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the region's Chief Crown Prosecutor, as well as the named Justice of the Peace who had signed the search warrant for our home—oddly, the corresponding search warrant for Anna's Mini bore no judicial name or signature.

Anna submitted her own series of complaints which related to the (potentially fraudulent) warrant for the Toyota, the unlawful extent of the search of our home, inappropriate seizure of property, denial of her basic rights outlined in PACE, and a lack of respect and courtesy shown by the attending officers.

In addition to this, we both lodged separate, formal complaints with the Investigatory Powers Tribunal in London, which questioned the necessity, legality, and proportionality of the police surveillance, as well as documenting breaches of our human rights: the right to liberty and security, the right to respect for private and family life, prohibition of discrimination, and the right to protection of property.

We waited over two weeks, finding our complaints were not even acknowledged; we met a solid wall of silence. It seemed the shit-show was so immense, nobody wanted to be the party to take the first step in acknowledging responsibility.

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Figure 33: My two-way radio collection.



Figure 34: My watch collection.

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Figure 35: Part of my collection of security-related badges.

A screenshot of an email from Google. The subject line is "Security alert". The body of the email starts with "Someone just used your password to try to sign in to your account. Google blocked them, but you still have access." Below this, there is a large red exclamation mark icon. The main message is "Someone tried to change how you sign in". A link below the message says "Google stopped this attempt, but if this wasn't you, someone else has access to your account. Check and secure your account now." At the bottom, there is a red button labeled "Check activity". Below the button, a note says "You can also see security activity at <https://myaccount.google.com/notifications>".

Figure 36: The security alert email from my Google account.

Given that the RSOU was financed by, and made up of officers from, five individual police forces, I considered it highly unlikely that any investigation would be appropriate or impartial—each force all had a vested interest in the Unit’s success. This meant that if any of the commanding officers seconded to the RSOU were found guilty of strategic and/or tactical wrongdoing, it would call into question the legality of evidence they had used to jail individuals since the Unit’s inception. It was for this reason that I considered the IOPC to have a particularly important role in the complaints process, as they remained impartial... allegedly.

I followed up with a telephone call to the IOPC, and the call-handler I spoke to claimed they hadn’t received my letter. It was never returned to the sender, so I was both curious and suspicious about its disappearance. Even more worryingly, even though the RSOU was one of ten nationwide policing units established by the UK government in 2001—*over 23 years ago*—when I told the call-handler I wanted to lodge a complaint about the Regional Special Operations Unit, she had a one-word response.

“Who?”

“Intelligence agencies keep things secret because they often violate the rule of law or of good behaviour.”

Julian Assange

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IN MARCH, ANNA and I received separate letters from just one of the handful of police forces which made up the RSOU. The sender, a manager within the force's own Internal Investigations Unit, confirmed that a multi-force meeting had taken place on 28 February, in which it had been decided their particular force would take the lead on the complaint investigation.

In reviewing our complaints, the manager had identified 77 separate allegations against the RSOU officers, which spanned over 20 sides of A4. The complaints fell under the categories of:

- i. Power to arrest and detain,
- ii. Obstruction of justice,
- iii. Search of premises and seizure of property,
- iv. Detention in police custody,
- v. Information,
- vi. Disability,
- vii. Overbearing or harassing behaviours,
- viii. Bail, identification and interview procedures,
- ix. Religion or belief,
- x. Disclosure of information,
- xi. Evidential procedures,
- xii. Handling of or damage to property/premises,
- xiii. Abuse of position for other purpose,
- xiv. Unprofessional attitude and disrespect,
- xv. Police action following contact.

Due to the sheer number and severity of the allegations, the force had referred the matter to the IOPC, who had simply bounced it back as being “suitable for local investigation”. This decision seemed logically absurd, in that a single PC was now being lumbered with investigating the actions of an entire regional policing unit, which involved officers from multiple forces, up to, and probably surpassing,

the rank of Detective Chief Inspector. Quite how a lone constable was going to eke answers out of some well-connected Sergeants and Inspectors in neighbouring forces remained to be seen.

That same day, we also received letters from the Investigatory Powers Tribunal in London, who confirmed receipt of our complaints regarding breaches of our human rights. They too confirmed that they were going to investigate, but sadly, none of this improved the way I felt. There used to be an old military saying: *Don't let the bastards grind you down*. It had taken ten long years, but my hopes for fair treatment had finally diminished to nothing.

A few days later, I attended the lunchtime appointment my GP had made for me. I had dropped off a copy of my complaint for him to review in advance, as any patient who, out of the blue, suddenly begins claiming that they're under surveillance, their home is bugged, and they're the victim of some grand-scale conspiracy is, rightly or wrongly, likely to be considered as suffering from delusions.

As I sat down, I could see the confusion and sadness in my doctor's eyes. He was truly speechless, and as he did during our phone conversation little over a week earlier, could only offer his apologies that I was once again going through hell, for no explicable reason. Like Sani, he admitted he'd never seen or dealt with anything quite like it, and he expressed his obvious concerns for my mental health. He asked whether I was suffering with any 'dark thoughts', and I told him that, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't answer his question in good conscience. He asked for my permission to make a referral to a safeguarding team, and I refused, knowing full-well that would probably involve someone conducting a 'welfare check' at my home, and given that I was on bail for firearms offences, in all likelihood they would bring the police with them for safety purposes. I couldn't blame them for that, but it showed the extent of the predicament I was in: I couldn't ask for, or accept, help, for fear of further malicious intervention from, or actions by, the police.

Finishing up the appointment, my GP offered to double my dosage of the combined anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication I was taking, which I agreed to, although I pointed out that it wouldn't make any difference to the cold, hard reality of my circumstances... there was no light at the end of this particular tunnel. I shook his hand on the way out, and thanked him for his time, professionalism, and

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kindness. The look in his eyes confirmed he didn't expect to see me again.

I made my way home, watching the people drive past in their cars, staring glumly out of the bus windows, queuing at the traffic lights. I longed to become one of them, just for a while. I was fed up of the stress, of being targeted, being excluded, being considered different. I would accept the monotony, the boredom, anything—just for a little bit longer. My future and my freedom were at risk, and I wanted to savour the few remaining days I had, even if they were overshadowed by the knowledge that I would certainly end up being jailed for longer than I'd been married, and in all likelihood, for longer than I'd known Anna.

I couldn't face that, and I don't know if she could either.

“There’s no way to rule innocent men. The only power any government has is the power to crack down on criminals. Well, when there aren’t enough criminals, one makes them. One declares so many things to be a crime that it becomes impossible for men to live without breaking laws.”

Ayn Rand
Atlas Shrugged

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A FEW DAYS later, I brewed myself a steaming hot cup of tea in a mug gifted by Anna, its humorous inscription a bittersweet reminder of our bond: *You are a silly shit, but I love you.* As I settled down on the sofa for a moment of reflection, I felt the weight of recent events bearing down on my shoulders.

Since lodging our complaints, a deafening silence had descended. The Home Secretary (and his administrative staff) had ignored my letter, as had the Justice of the Peace. The Crown Prosecution Service were quick to wash their hands of any potential interest, hastily claiming it was nothing to do with them—unfortunately, I think they missed the not-so-subtle point. But what mattered most was that the RSOU’s futile surveillance tactics had been laid bare, their underhand methods, clandestine operations, and wasteful spending exposed to the harsh glare of daylight and public scrutiny. In light of the recent scathing critique from the Inspectorate of Constabulary, uncomfortable questions about the RSOU’s leadership and expenditure loomed large on the horizon, as well as (I sincerely hoped) questions about the Unit’s exploitation of the people they chose to investigate. Yet, despite their seemingly deliberate missteps, the RSOU remained shielded by the institutional inertia of the police service, a formidable political monster which had become adept at adapting to scrutiny.

We were playing a high-stakes game of chess, and the only thing left to do was wait, which for me, was a no-man’s land; limbo. I realised I had come full-circle, and contemplated my many interactions with the police, beginning with my early encounters with the Oaf over twenty years ago, to this: the final showdown with the pioneers of painfully incompetent and exquisitely callous modern corruption, the RSOU. Though I had so far endured it all, surviving at great personal cost, the enormity of the toll it had taken was evident. I felt discarded and broken, a mere shell of my former self, finally cast out and abandoned by a society that seemed to have no place for me.

Anticipating the RSOU's next move, I considered the severity and length of the battle ahead. It was a foregone conclusion that the police wouldn't back down, they never did. It was as though they lived and breathed the motto *never apologise, never explain*. As my bail date continued to silently creep closer, I asked myself: do I *really* want to subject myself to further false accusations, lies, and arrests? As the police edged ever closer to their end goal of portraying me as a terrorist, this meant my time in custody risked being extended by days, even weeks—and I would never know until I surrendered myself. Could I cope with being detained in a cell for so long, devoid of any meaningful purpose, being lied to again and again, refused communication with the few people I loved? Did I want to sleep on a cold, waterproof gym mat with no pillow, whilst surviving on Pot Noodles, digestive biscuits, and stale coffee? Could I survive the anxiety, the stress, and isolation? No, no, and no.

Ultimately, irrespective of whether the police opted for a couple of the most 'serious' charges or went for a full barrage of every single allegation they could muster, I knew the outcome would be grim. If they ever obtained my medical notes, as they assured me they would, they would see my history of stress and depression, the suicidal thoughts which plagued me... the risk would become real. I knew then that they wouldn't ever let me go, preferring instead to keep me locked up, constantly being watched through the hatch in the door, unable to sleep under the bright fluorescent lights. What made the idea unbearable is that it wouldn't even be considered punishment. Prevention of self-harm or escape was only ever intended to ensure the successful administration of whatever passed for 'justice'.

Sadly, I knew that it wouldn't matter a great deal if the complaints Anna and I had submitted *were* upheld, as irrespective of whether the police obtain evidence via legal or illegal means, it can still be presented in court. This has always seemed illogical to me, that our country upholds the British model of policing as the 'best in the world', yet our justice system will openly accept evidence obtained unlawfully. The USA, however, whilst routinely criticised for their own style of policing, operates a strict doctrine called *the fruits of the poisonous tree*. In essence, any evidence obtained via illegal methods is inadmissible in a court of law, which—at least, in theory—obliges investigators to play by the rules, no matter how frustrating that might be.

And so, even though it seemed so far away, I imagined the grandeur of the courtroom, where truth seemed such a distant concept. To stand *any* chance at being understood, I would need to expose my most private self to the world, declaring the impulsive thoughts and behaviours I had spent my entire life masking and concealing. Any explanations I might be brave enough to give would be callously ridiculed and overshadowed by the prosecutor's damning narrative, supported by the RSOU's agenda. In their eyes, I was merely a convenient scapegoat to either bolster the Unit's waning image, or to provide justification for a budget increase for the next financial year. A victim of politics, I anticipated ten years' imprisonment, perhaps longer depending on whether the RSOU chose to fabricate evidence against me. Nothing seemed beyond the realms of possibility any more; we truly lived in the Orwellian world of thoughtcrime.

Was my fear of facing imprisonment a demonstration of innate weakness or cowardice? I didn't think so. Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice revealed that in the twelve months from September 2021 to 2022, there were 20,872 assaults in prisons—and they were just the figures that had been *officially* recorded.* The numbers demonstrated an increase of 11% on the previous year. Incidents classified as 'serious assaults' per 1,000 prisoners had increased 18% in twelve months. From December 2021 to December 2022 there had been 301 deaths in prison, 74 of which were suicide. In a similar twelve-month period, there had been 54,761 incidents of self-harm. England and Wales had 122 prisons, so that equated to almost 450 self-harm incidents per prison, per year. The number had increased 164% since 2008. Absolutely everything was throwing up red flags—was that the sort of environment in which an autistic ex-police officer with depression would be considered safe? I asked a close friend, an ex-prison officer, what I could realistically expect upon my arrival. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "A kicking." So, I would be a walking target: if the other prisoners didn't get me, my depression probably would.

* 'Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales Deaths in Prison Custody to December 2022 Assaults and Self-harm to September 2022', published 26 January 2023. Available at:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63d139e1d3bf7f3c46fe6003/safety-in-custody-q3-2022.pdf>

As I steadily contemplated my fate, I realised the legacy I would leave behind: a distorted image shaped by biased media and online vitriol. Despite my inherent kindness, generosity, and humour, I would be remembered as a caricature, a symbol of societal paranoia, a blueprint for what people should *not* be, an example of what *not* to make of your life. I couldn't bear to begin thinking about the words which would become associated with my name. I would be voiceless against the onslaught. It was a sobering thought that since time began, history was merely the version of events written by the victor.

The prospect of imprisonment loomed the largest, its implications beyond dire. Yet, amidst the growing feeling of despair, I found a grim irony in the absurdity of it all. We lived in a world where collecting books or bettering your knowledge could condemn you more harshly than murder, rape, or robbery, and as a result, our trust in the very institutions meant to uphold justice was shattered beyond repair. Not for the first time in my life, I felt a profound sense of disillusionment with the world.

The road ahead seemed bleak. The sword of Damocles hung precariously; it was so close I could feel the breath of it swaying, the razor's edge cutting the air which gently eddied around the hairs on the nape of my neck. People say that trust, once broken, cannot easily be repaired, and my trust had been broken more times than I could ever remember. There was some further irony in the fact that, out of necessity, I had come to adopt the catchphrase from *The X-Files* which I watched so avidly as a teenager: *Trust no-one*.

As I faced my future, I couldn't help but wonder—where was the justice in a system which was designed to quietly destroy those it deemed disposable?

“A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent,
life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal,
as gently as we awake from dreams.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Nature

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AFTER FINISHING MY tea, I glanced at the calendar, noting that time continued its relentless march forward. I didn't have much longer left. Like a lightbulb suddenly illuminating the darkness, my way forward—the path I needed to take—immediately became clear.

My previous manuscript, *Rotten to the Core*, remained unfinished. Sadly, it was destined never to reach completion; it had fallen into the hands of the enemy. Yet, in its sacrificial absence, I found a burning new purpose—to document the present moment, to capture the *here* and *now*. I resolved that my final act of true freedom would be to engage in something productive: to cast a message in a bottle into the vast sea of humanity. While I lay no claim to being a teacher, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had endured some of the ugliest aspects of our so-called 'developed' society, but for what purpose? Perhaps, in sharing some of these private experiences, I could offer a framework to provoke thought and discussion, and maybe even inspire people to stand up, to *fight back*. At the very least, I hope that a few people out there might be more inclined to notice, to pay attention, to be more measured in their judgements, to question the dominant narrative.

In today's world, while we're frequently taught the harmful nature of stereotypes as being based on limited, outdated, or incorrect information, we're still encouraged to oversimplify complex individuals, adopting a one-size-fits-all mentality. This leaves little chance for people like me to understand ourselves, let alone allowing us to be understood by others. If my ASD had been diagnosed much earlier, perhaps my later life would have unfolded differently. Yet dwelling on the *what-ifs* and *might-have-beens* serves little purpose, as broader societal attitudes would likely remain unchanged, and some other poor soul plucked from the country's 67 million inhabitants would probably be standing in my shoes, facing the same kind of predicament. It is these realities, among others, that deter many good-hearted individuals from delving into the unknown; they're paralyzed by fear rather than driven by the natural human desire to conquer it.

I didn't want to have endured these experiences for nothing, so I would start to write again, to rebuild.

If I have learned one lesson in my life, it is this: knowledge, irrespective of the reasons you have chosen to acquire it, is considered more dangerous than any weapon. It cannot be erased, and it can be shared in many forms, duplicated and spread far and wide. In the intricate web of social dynamics, possessing information outside of the accepted norm invites suspicion and apprehension. Mental growth, focus, and even simple intellectual stimulation are drives and desires many people no longer seem to respect, understand, or appreciate. But, if you wish to travel along such avenues, one must not forget that not everything in life needs a reason. When people ask me: *Why?* My answer is always the same: *Just because.*

I have learned that, armed with knowledge in the professional sphere, colleagues may perceive you as a threat to their standing, while managers might view your expertise as a challenge to their authority. Outside the confines of employment, society casts a wary eye upon those who wield intellect with confidence, sometimes labelling such individuals as 'aloof' or 'eccentric'—perceived as odd, they are often given a wide berth. It seems that the very fabric of our society is woven with threads of apprehension toward those who dare to tread the path of intellectual pursuit. Even the law, tasked with upholding justice, may see a knowledgeable individual not as an asset to society, but as a potential menace, a force to be contained. In this paradoxical landscape, where knowledge is both revered and reviled, navigating the complexities of interaction becomes a delicate dance, where one must tread lightly to avoid the sting of misunderstanding and prejudice.

In my experience, nowhere is that sting more apparent than in the workplace. In confronting the elaborate, interconnecting realities of neurodivergence, mental health, and employment, it becomes evident that our society often overlooks the potentially unique contributions of individuals on the autistic spectrum, precisely those who are statistically *more* inclined to have in-depth knowledge that vastly surpasses the norm. Unfortunately, the statistics paint a stark picture: despite possessing remarkable talents and capabilities, only a fraction of neurodivergent adults find themselves employed, facing barriers fuelled by societal misconceptions and systemic challenges. Moreover, the journey of self-discovery for many, like myself, begins

much later in life, often only after enduring hardships which range from financial instability to mental health struggles and social isolation.

However, amidst these trials lies a beacon of hope—a call for understanding and acceptance. By shedding light on the deeply personal and uncomfortable experiences recounted within these chapters, I hope to promote real, meaningful dialogue that encourages empathy, inclusivity, and a recognition of the invaluable contributions which *every* individual can bring to the table. It is my belief that the key to fostering a more equitable and compassionate society lies in the willingness of everyone—employers, the education system, the criminal justice system, the NHS—to *embrace* neurodiversity, to recognise true potential, and to cultivate environments where differences are not only understood, but are accepted without fear of silent judgement. Through this collective effort, we can pave the way for a future where everyone, regardless of whether they are neurodivergent or not, can find their place in the world and thrive, fulfilling their potential, becoming the best they can be, and enriching the fabric that forms the never-ending tapestry of our society.

As I picked up Anna’s laptop to begin my task (and to hell with my bail conditions preventing me from deleting digital data), I had one last thought. Do I truly *deserve* to face spending a significant proportion of the rest of my natural life in prison? With respect, I don’t think so, no. Does my wife *deserve* the emotional trauma of knowing I will soon be wrenched away, shackled, caged, and transported to the other end of the country, perhaps never to be seen again? (Our prisons are, after all, not regarded as the safest of places.) Of course not.

If I choose to succumb to my fate, walking back through the heavy, steel doors to return to the pastel green custody suite of the Stock, I will be surrendering myself to the intricate political mechanisms which sustain the forward momentum of Operation Scuppered. The RSOU didn’t treat me fairly the first time, so are they any more likely to play by the rules after being subjected a series of complaints? I doubt it. As someone suffering with a long-standing mental illness, will I receive any meaningful help from the very same system that aims tomorrow to slip a noose around my neck? I doubt that too.

So, all of these considerations leave but one question:

What will the outcome be?

I have the rest of my life to decide.

“Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall.
He will end by destroying the earth.”

Albert Schweitzer

Epilogue

AUTISM IS A strange old beast. I described it to a psychologist as being like a higher self, one that always knows best, which frequently takes over, controlling things so effortlessly you have almost no awareness it even exists. Even when you recognise it, no matter how many times you allow it to take the wheel, it will never be satisfied.

It is temptation, becoming the money that burns a hole in your pocket. It is stubbornness, being the inability to take ‘no’ for an answer. It is insistence, nagging you to point out the misaligned picture, the mark on that formal outfit, or the incorrect punctuation. It is fright, manifesting as the refusal to leave your comfort zone, plaguing you with *what-ifs*. It is obsession, making you immerse yourself in subjects you insist on experiencing, binging with all five senses until you become overwhelmed. It is discomfort, emerging as the dislike of bright lights, loud noises, or strange textures. It is confusion, bringing bewilderment when confronted with faces wearing expressions you can’t quite understand, or instructions you follow to the letter because you can’t read the invisible expectations written between the lines. It is isolation, in that all of these things cause you to prefer time alone, because the only person who understands you best is *you*. It is embarrassment, because you never want people to know any of this, lest they perceive you as different... But they will do anyway.

I know the hopes that autism offers are a false friend. It offers reassurance that you’re like other people, that you’re the same, but I promise you, you’re being fooled. You’re not the same. Autism doesn’t make you any less of a person—in fact, in many ways you’re *more*. You have a stronger drive, deeper desires, more resilience, a greater capacity for certain understanding. Autism gives you two faces: the one you show to other people, and the one you only see yourself when looking in the mirror. You see, until now, nobody *really* knew about my battle with autism.

My name is Alexander; I am a real person, with a real life and real feelings. I own a collection of over 1,200 physical books, over 10,000

eBooks and over 3,200 films. I also have a hoard of over 50 hats, 40 board games, 25 sets of tarot cards, 24 torches, 23 two-way radios, 18 watches, 17 card games, and ten walking sticks (one of which I crafted myself). I also have five monoculars, four binoculars, four different games consoles, three laptops, and two tablets. I play *Pokémon Go!* on two phones and have over 40 different 4-star Pokémons. I have owned five motorbikes and seven cars. I love animals; as an adult, I have shared my home with one cockatiel, one cat, six guinea pigs, three dogs and one hamster. Over time, I have brought three injured pigeons and one hedgehog home to help them recover; sadly, one pheasant died in my arms. I have also found homes for three unwanted dogs... I had some help from Paul O'Grady there. I don't like bright lights, I can be obsessive with details, I enjoy the stability of routine, I prefer to eat the same food and listen to the same music, and I bite my nails when I am nervous. I usually read up to five different books at once, I never wear odd socks, and I always iron my handkerchiefs and fold them four times. I always wear a belt, and wear my watch on my right wrist.

My name is Alexander, and I sometimes struggle interacting with other people. I have been unfairly dismissed from three jobs because my managers and colleagues did not understand me; two companies have settled out of court, and one made me sign a disclosure to agree I would never be employed by their organisation again. I was a police officer for twelve years and worked at three different police stations. I received two commendations and directly saved two lives. One day, I stopped one car, arrested one man after an interaction lasting only three minutes, and I spent the next ten years paying the price for doing so. For my hearing, I provided a 64-page booklet containing 21 pages of character references and 19 letters of thanks, but was sacked by three people who ignored all of the evidence in front of their eyes.

My name is Alexander, and the police believe I am a terrorist. They think that, just because I collect things, I want to hurt people. I have never wanted to hurt anybody. I am currently on police bail. I am the lone subject of one police operation which has so far involved around 50 different officers from five different police forces. So far, I have been arrested on suspicion of committing five criminal offences; I believe four of those arrests were unlawful. I was placed in cell number 9, which measured approximately 4 x 3.5 metres. It had 35 windows. I was kept in custody for 15 hours. I was interviewed three

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times, totalling almost six hours. I was bailed with eight different conditions, many of which did not relate to the matters for which I had been arrested. When I got home, I found the police had spent 14 hours in my house, where they had seized over 100 items of my property, valued at thousands of pounds. Many of these items are unique and cannot be replaced. They took my collection of over 10,000 eBooks, my collection of over 3,200 films, my collection of over 200 digital music albums, and every single photograph I have ever taken. They have also taken many things they have not accounted for.

My name is Alexander, and as a result of the way we have been treated, my wife and I lodged two separate complaints with two national investigatory bodies. One accepted six breaches of our human rights, and the other accepted 77 allegations of police wrongdoing. Both investigations are ongoing at the time of this book being published, which contains over 124,000 words spanning 78 chapters—one chapter to correspond to almost every allegation made. I'll probably get in trouble for publishing this work, but I don't care any more. The police can't do anything worse to me than they already have, and I would rather the public knew the truth about those who call themselves our protectors; the apparent upholders of our laws. To me, it is clear who poses the greatest risk to the wellbeing of society, as long after I am gone, the police will still exist. How many acts, items, words, and books will have been criminalised by then?

My name is Alexander, and I sometimes realise how lonely I am. Since I was arrested, 0 people have come to visit me.

That's how deep the rabbit hole goes.